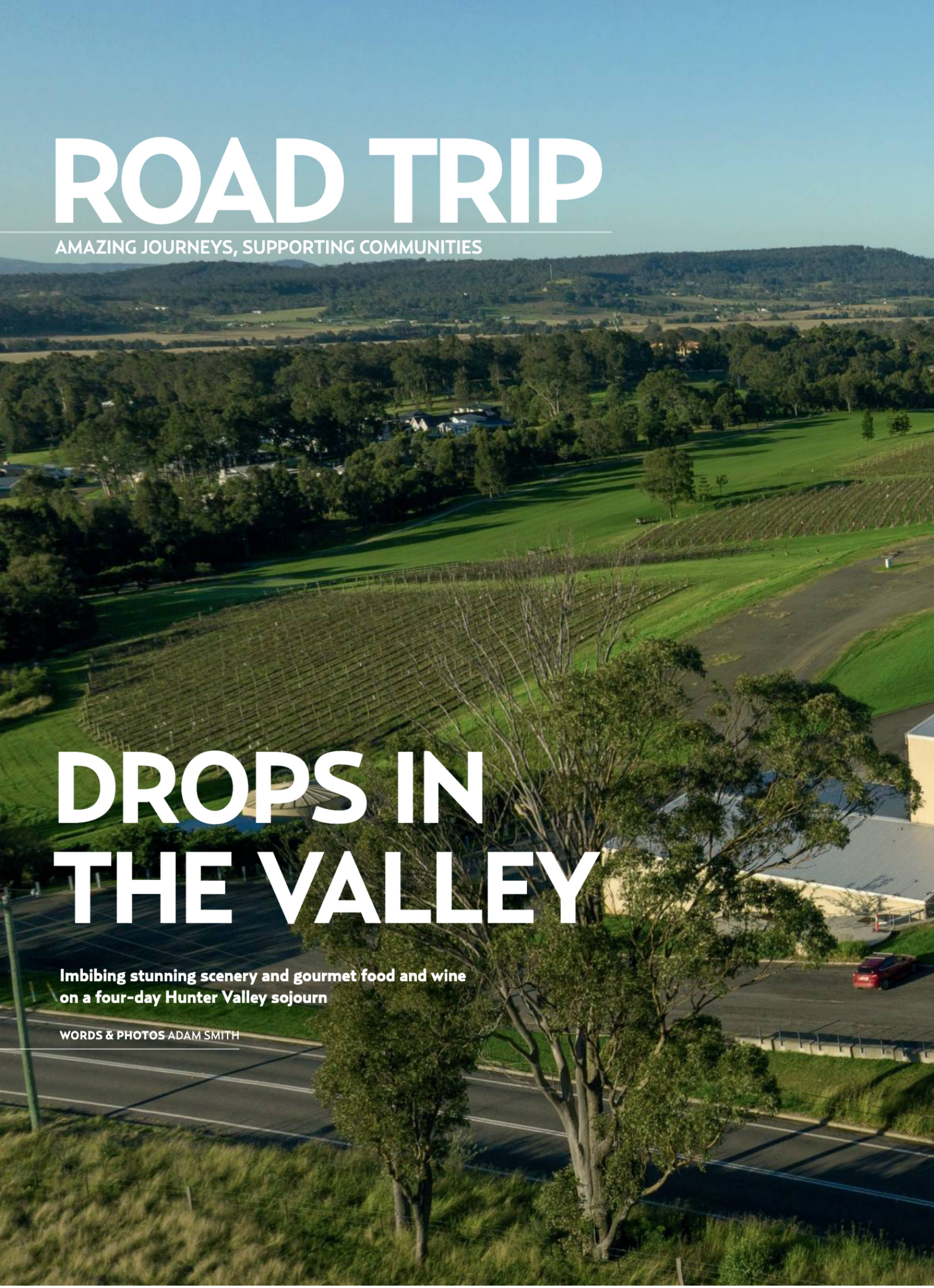
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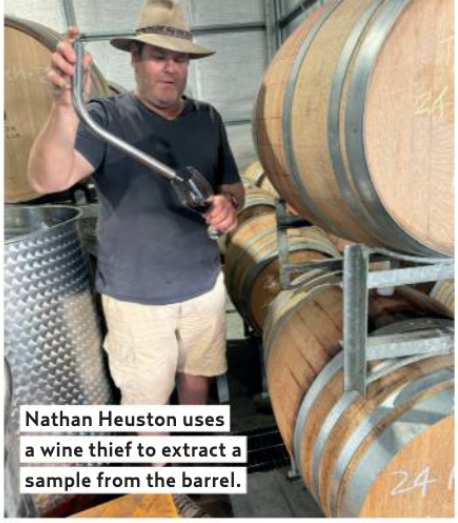
DROPS IN THE VALLEY

Imbibing stunning scenery and gourmet food and wine on a four-day Hunter Valley sojourn

WORDS & PHOTOS ADAM SMITH



A bird's eye view of Bimbadgen Winery.



Nathan Heuston uses a wine thief to extract a sample from the barrel.





YOU MIGHT THINK 11am is too early to crack open a bottle of wine and ordinarily you'd be right. But on this grey and soggy Tuesday morning it's practically a job requirement. I can already hear the groans of disapproval from *Open Road* management at this statement, so let me clarify by saying it's for my new calling as a winemaker in the Hunter Valley.

After wrestling through the Sydney and M1 traffic, I've arrived in Pokolbin at McCaffrey's Estate – a family owned and operated small producer of handcrafted wines – for its 'Winemaker for the Day' experience. The knowledgeable Declan McCaffrey guides me through the process of creating a unique wine blend. Armed with a platter of local cheeses from Hunter Belle, we delve into recognising differences between red varietals in colour, body, sweetness, acidity, tannins and other characteristics. Once my preferred proportions are settled on, all that's left is to give an empty bottle a squirt of carbon dioxide, which prevents microbiological instability from oxygen exposure, before filling and capping.

Exiting McCaffrey's charming cellar door with what's surely a gold-medal-worthy bottle of plonk tucked under my arm, I survey some of the vineyard below. It's almost winter and the vines have lost many of their leaves as they wither into dormancy.

A short drive down Hermitage Road is Hunter Wine Lab, where I meet owner Nathan Heuston. He points out the different-sized wine barrels with old names like barrique (225 litres), hogshead (300 litres) and puncheon (500 litres). "The larger the barrel, the less contact between oak and juice, so you get softer characters imparted to the wine," he tells me. Also affecting the outcome is the barrel wood's grain structure, where Nathan uses a tight grain to better protect the wine, rather than a coarse grain that will impart more characters and tannins.

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Nathan hasn't always been a winemaker and brewer; his previous trades were in occupational therapy and metallurgy. A 1994 Hunter Valley wine tour ignited the first spark of his true passion. "My philosophy since then has been 'drinking is learning'," he adds through a grin. With this sage credo in mind, we move on to his beer brand, Zymurgy, and a sampling of the pale ale. It's light and refreshing, unusual for a pale ale, and I can't resist grabbing a pack on the way out, along with some cans of his interesting-sounding Choc Milk Porter.

While Hunter Wine Lab has only been in operation since 2021, Audrey Wilkinson winery had its first grapevines planted back in 1866 and is set amongst the foothills of the Broken Back Range. The rain is persisting but isn't heavy enough to spoil the spectacular outlook over the vineyard from the visitor carpark. A magpie's musical warbling is the perfect welcome as it searches for insects and earthworms emerging from their soaked burrows beneath the vines. The cellar door is busy for a weekday and there's a small museum area to the right of the entrance where visitors can learn of the Wilkinson family history and see old coopering (barrel making) tools on display.

I consider staying for a wine tasting on the balcony to enjoy the view, but it's time to check in to my first accommodation at

Main image: Destination NSW





From far left to right: interesting history and gorgeous vistas await at Audrey Wilkinson's cellar door; Hunter Valley Gardens offers manicured serenity and friendly koi fish; the start of five delectable courses and wine pairings at Esca Bimbadgen; getting the lie of the land from Pokolbin Mountains Road Lookout.

Hunter Valley Resort + Farm. It's situated off Hermitage Road and offers wine tasting, horse riding, Segway tours, cooking classes and more. I head to its 4 Pines at the Farm bistro and taproom for dinner with resort owner Philip Helé. Over a starter of succulent crumbed calamari and main of snapper with dill sauce and cherry tomatoes, we discuss the Hunter's history and Philip's love of electric vehicles after becoming an early Tesla adopter (the resort has two on-site charging stations for guests). He sees the Hunter Valley as Sydney's playground and tells me his 'Wine Train' package, where visitors depart Central Station via rail and get picked up from Singleton Station, is a popular alternative to traditional self-drive Hunter visits.

The following drizzly morning has me returning to the bistro for a hearty eggs benedict and bacon brekkie. The poor weather hasn't stopped a group of corporate retreat types gathering outside for a spot of laser clay target shooting, but it has scuttled my plan for hiring an e-bike and touring along Hermitage Road's beaut cycleway that was completed in 2017.

It's back to the car for a short meander to Tintilla Estate Wines where five different types of olives are grown amongst the vineyards. Jars of them are offered for sale in the quaint Italian-style cellar door, but it's the winery's own tomato chilli relish, sampled on a cheese cracker, that really tickles my fancy. I'm always on the lookout for a sandwich condiment to rival my late gran's homemade tomato chutney, so buying a jar here is money well spent.

The first of two visits to Bimbadgen Winery, which many out-of-towners may recognise for its 'A Day on the Green' concert events, starts with a tasting of its semillon, chardonnay and shiraz wines. Sitting at the bar and facing windows into the impressive wine production area, the vibe is sophisticated and friendly, thanks in part to cellar door manager, Jordan Blake-Blundell, patiently guiding me through each drop. She also twists my rubber arm into trying the new Night Merchant gin in a grapefruit and tonic cocktail, before a lunch of woodfired pizza topped with chicken, prosciutto and pesto.

Set amongst Bimbadgen's Palmers Lane vineyards is the newly opened luxury accommodation of The Lane Retreat. There's no tedious check-in process; guests instead receive an SMS and email with a code number to unlock the door of their private studio when it's ready for them. I download an app that

HUNTER HISTORY

The Hunter Valley is Australia's oldest continual wine-growing region, having received its first grapevine cuttings from the Botanic Gardens at Sydney Cove in 1828. Its fascinating story is traced in *Hunter Wine: A History* by Julie McIntyre and John Germov, which details the events and people that shaped the region. This likely began with the local Indigenous communities of Wonnarua, Darkinjung and others using fire for countless generations to manage the land, controlling undergrowth and subsequently making it easier for settlers to raise crops. But this couldn't have happened without a 1797 expedition from Lieutenant John Shortland in pursuit of escaped convicts after they made off with the best colonial-built ship of the time, *Cumberland*. Shortland didn't find them but he did come upon the mouth of the Hunter River and sighted deposits of coal and prized red cedar trees at later-to-be Newcastle. This attracted enterprise and opened up settlement inland to the Hunter Valley's fertile frontiers.



Life is art at Winmark Wines.

A gallery is tucked in behind the cellar door, showcasing colourful paintings, ceramics and glassware

also lets my smartphone access the room at the touch of an icon. The picturesque view from the rear deck is across a small lake to the Broken Back Range where low clouds cling like fairyfloss. The chic bathroom's walk-in shower cubicle is almost big enough to be a second room and its twin shower heads are sure to please couples. After a long soak, I recline on the bed with a good book for the afternoon and later graze on cured meats, dates, crackers and cheeses delivered to my studio from The Lane Pantry.

Rising to morning sunshine for a change enables a horticultural ambulation around Hunter Valley Gardens. The $40 adult entry fee isn't cheap, but I'm soon lost in a colourful world of living sculptures, intoxicating scents and tranquil babbling water features. Temporary exhibits of animatronic dragons, dinosaurs and giant insects give roars and add a sense of magic for visitors with kids in tow. I much prefer searching out the many peaceful nooks and crannies away from the hoo-ha for a few hours, taking photos, and greeting the koi fish gulping at the surface of the Oriental Garden's waters.

At the adjacent shopping village, the Taste of the Country café is bursting with ornamental nick-nacks and provides a much-needed coffee break. There are all kinds of cute little shops to browse here that specialise in antiques, souvenirs, lollies and homewares. There's even one devoted entirely to Christmas decorations.

Things are about to take an extravagant turn back at Bimbadgen Winery where I'm booked into a five-course lunch and signature wine pairing at its flagship restaurant, Esca Bimbadgen. From kingfish sashimi with grapes and freeze-dried mandarin, to quail ballotine and a deconstructed baklava dessert, I savour every morsel and sip while seated on the balcony overlooking the beautiful vineyard. The ensuing food coma leads to another lazy afternoon and early bedtime cocooned in comfort at The Lane Retreat, as visiting kangaroos graze in the waning sun just beyond the studio's deck.

Not having to drop off a keycard the next day has me thinking I've forgotten something but certain this must be the future of holiday stays. Other guests are lounging by the stunning pool as I drive by and head to Emma's Cottage – home to Bimbadgen's new boutique label, Alter Wines. This small vineyard and cellar door is gearing up for a wedding on my arrival. Emma ("Not *the* Emma") takes me through a selection of wine tastings, but with a few hours of driving ahead I'm forced to use the spit bucket. Not to leave unsatisfied, I buy a bottle of the shiraz pinot and stop to check out the nearby tiny Rothbury cemetery where some of the Hunter's pioneering winemakers are buried.

Having planned to take the backroad route home, I skirt the village edge of Broke and turn left onto Wollombi Road for my final stop at Winmark Wines. Owner Karin Adcock, who brought Pandora jewellery to Australia, has paired vibrant art and winemaking together in the one gorgeous estate. A gallery is tucked in behind the cellar door, showcasing colourful paintings, ceramics and glassware. The sprawling lawns (I can only imagine the mowing fees would be putting her gardener's kids through university) are dotted with large, thought-provoking sculptures. Visitors can wander the grounds and read about the story behind each, with some for sale, including a steel one of a motorcycle helmet for $20,000 that warns of dangers on the region's roads for reckless riders.

It's a salient message for the often narrow and winding journey back to Sydney, though it sure beats the freeway for rustic beauty, as black cockatoos squawk and swoop from roadside gumtrees. There's time to think about which meal tonight will best pair with the red blend I concocted at the start of my trip. My stomach says it's a choice between reheated spag bol or a takeaway burger and chips. It'll take more than one Hunter Valley visit to refine this winemaker's palate. OR

MORE INFORMATION

McCaffrey's Estate | **mccaffreysestate.com.au**
Hunter Wine Lab | **hunterwinelab.com**
Audrey Wilkinson | **audreywilkinson.com.au**
Hunter Valley Resort + Farm | **huntervalley.com.au**
Tintilla Estate Wines | **tintilla.com.au**
Bimbadgen Winery | **bimbadgen.com.au**
The Lane Retreat | **thelaneretreat.com.au**
Hunter Valley Gardens | **huntervalleygardens.com.au**
Emma's Cottage | **emmascottage.com.au**
Winmark Wines | **winmarkwines.com.au**



Clockwise from below: The Lane Retreat's private studios are the Hunter Valley's newest luxury accommodation option; Emma's Cottage is home to Bimbadgen's Alter Wines label; amazing sculptures are in the expansive grounds of Winmark Wines.





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