

## **Restaurants with a rest**

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### **Body**

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From kitchen garden beds to comfy guest beds, country chefs are adding rooms to their recipes for success, write Ute Junker and Anthony Dennis.

The dining room, with its high ceilings and arched windows, is as grand as you would expect from a building that was once a heritage bank. The exquisitely plated meals - an artfully deboned duck leg dappled with pomegranate seeds and dried beetroot wedges, for instance - taste as tantalising as they look.

Yet ask Michael Ryan, chef and owner of the Good Food Guide 2020 two-hatted Provenance restaurant in the goldrush town of Beechworth, three hours from Melbourne, about his secret weapon and he will gesture towards the rear of his property.

"I don't know if we'd still be in business if we didn't have our guest rooms," Ryan says of Provenance's accommodation, which opened a decade ago at the same time as the restaurant. "At our previous restaurant in [nearby] Myrtleford, we were part of a motel, and I could see that to survive you needed to pull people from further afield," he says. "If you can offer accommodation as well as food, you have a much stronger appeal."

Ryan isn't the only restaurateur to have adopted a hotelier's guise with chefs around Australia, from Brae, in rural Victoria, to Homage, in regional Queensland, offering their guests not just a meal but also a place to rest their head afterwards so they can forget about a designated driver and the trip home.

On one level, it's simply good business for a regional restaurant to also offer rooms. However, some chefs enjoy the opportunity to expand the guest experience beyond the dining room.

"[The rooms are] there to keep the party going," says Dan Hunter, chef and co-owner of Brae, the Good Food Guide 2020 "restaurant of the year" recipient near the Great Ocean Road, which includes six guest rooms. He says that after savouring a multi-course meal with matching wines, piling into a car for a long drive home can really spoil the mood. "When you get to stay, everything just continues and perhaps even gets better. It's a chance to lush out."

The restaurant-with-rooms concept may be relatively new to Australia, but it is a long-held tradition in many parts of the world. Hunter and his wife and business partner Julianne Bagnato drew some of his inspiration from the Japanese tradition of ryokan inns, which offer "bath, dinner, bed and breakfast - incredible, seasonal and local cuisine and a genuine do-anything-for-you-style hospitality".

Elsewhere in Victoria, Alla Wolf-Tasker, a pioneer of the restaurant with accommodation, opened the acclaimed two-hatted Lake House in Daylesford more than 30 years ago and added her first rooms not long after. She drew her inspiration from the regional restaurants she visited in Europe.

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It proved so successful that the Lake House empire now includes 33 rooms on site (a nearby property has just opened) as well as a cooking school, a spa and a restaurant. Wolf-Tasker has embraced her second career as a hotelier, saying that running a hotel has a lot in common with running a restaurant.

"[It is about] reading one's guests on arrival," she says. "Have they had a harried day? Do they need a soft landing and for someone to offer them a comfortable library chair and a great cocktail? Are they fatigued? Do they need to have less discussion about their menu and have their dishes come a little more quickly? I love that nuancing of the guest experience that offers the opportunity for bespoke service."

In the decades since Lake House opened, the restaurant's success has helped transform Daylesford and its surroundings into an in-demand destination, with the flow-on effects extending way beyond the farmers who supply the restaurant. "Our community includes gardeners, carpenters, fridge mechanics, electricians, plumbers, upholsterers, curtain makers, mechanics, artists, writers, musicians," Wolf-Tasker says.

Relationships with local producers are the bedrock of any regional restaurant and building that network can be surprisingly difficult, according to Ash Martin of Spicers Hidden Vale's Homage Restaurant, a Good Food one-hatted property, an hour from Brisbane. Homage is located in what Martin describes as "the most fertile farming land in the southern hemisphere" but despite that, he says it took a year of conversations with local farmers to set up his network of suppliers for ingredients on his menus.

"We went from farm to farm," Martin says, only to discover the local farmers were not used to dealing with individual buyers. "They weren't set up for what we were doing - we only needed 100 kilograms of sweetcorn, not thousands of tons."

Martin's persistence paid off, and he now works with a range of small-batch producers who supply him with everything from olives to goat's cheese. "Our Murray cod farmer used to grow lucerne but because he wasn't generating enough income, he diversified into farmed fish," Martin says. "We buy his cod, so he came to us and said, 'What else do you need?' We didn't have a chicken supplier, so he started doing that; and now he also supplies us with eggs."

One matter is clear: there is nothing simple about running a regional restaurant, let alone one with accommodation, though Brae's Hunter and Bagnato had previous hotel-style experience at the Royal Mail at Dunkeld near the Grampians in central Victoria.

"It's difficult to run world-class businesses in regional Australia, and often our workforce doesn't meet the demand in numbers or skill," Hunter says. Nonetheless, he says, "diners are strongly drawn to regional restaurants in which the owners are trying to do something special for their guests while best representing the agriculture and environment of their location".

What the best of these restaurants have in common is their sense of place, according to Wolf-Tasker. "A great regional restaurant is like nowhere else because of the ingredients on its plates, the local - preferably self-grown - botanicals in its cocktails, a decent spread of local tipples on its wine list, but also a sense that the restaurant team knows and understands the local suppliers of all this bounty."

Homage's Ash Martin, for one, is convinced that, despite the challenges, the future for destination dining is bright. "With services like Uber Eats, it's very easy for people to sit at home. So the idea of heading into the country and having a full food experience - walking through our market garden, our smokehouse, our fermenting room, before sitting down to lunch and staying the night or longer - is appealing. It gives them a context for what they are eating."

The 40th anniversary Good Food Guide 2020 published by The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, is on sale at bookshops, newsagents and also from The Store, with free shipping, for \$29.99. See [thestore.com.au/gfg20](http://thestore.com.au/gfg20)

BRAE, BIRREGURRA VICTORIA

THE CHEF Dan Hunter's serially hatted Brae, outside Birregurra, 130 kilometres south-west of Melbourne, was recently crowned restaurant of the year - city and country included - by the critics behind the Good Food Guide

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2020. But it's easy to overlook the fact that Hunter and partner, Julianne Bagnato, as well as running a premier fine diner, are also mean hoteliers.

**THE ROOMS** Six luxurious suites are positioned in landscaped surrounds a short pre- or post-prandial stroll from the restaurant. At 60-square metres or so in size each, these architect-designed delights accommodate two adults and feature every mod-con and some not so mod-ones in the form of a turntable and a selection of vinyl. Above the king-sized bed, fitted in organic cotton linens, there's a skylight for star-gazing before slumber while the room boasts underfloor heating that extends to the bathroom where a tub overlooks paddocks and the Otway Ranges. The suites, which also come with a selection of top wines and spirits and mixers for cocktails, were built with recycled materials and use solar energy, harvested rainwater and have an eco-friendly waste water system.

**THE FOOD** Despite the excellence of the rooms, the food, of course, remains the star attraction. While you won't retire to your room hungry at the three-hatted Brae, this is a restaurant where each carefully crafted and conceived dish in the 10-course tasting menu is a statement in artistry Hunter developed at the Michelin star-studded Mugaritz in Spain. If you can squeeze any more in after the gastronomic epic, there's an optional supper plate for houseguests delivered to your suite, as well as a gourmet breakfast platter the next morning.

**THE STAY** Take a stroll around Brae's extensive, and signposted, kitchen garden which supplies a literally growing portion of the fresh produce for Hunter and his team's exquisite degustation dishes. House guests at Brae tend to stay a single night but if your budget allows, consider a second night with a more casual dinner in town.

**DON'T MISS** Charming Birregurra serves as a good base, should you choose to turn your pilgrimage to Brae into a fully-fledged holiday, from which to explore the Great Ocean Road as well as the surrounding Otway Ranges.

**ESSENTIALS** Brae's guest suites start from \$615 including breakfast with degustation lunches and dinners from \$275. Brae Restaurant, 4285 Cape Otway Road, Birregurra, Victoria. Phone (03) 5236 2226. See [braerestaurant.com](http://braerestaurant.com); [visitvictoria.com](http://visitvictoria.com)

## BIOTA DINING, BOWRAL NSW

**THE CHEF** James Viles is all about commitment at Biota, his two-hatted Southern Highlands restaurant just under 90 minutes' drive from Sydney. It's exemplified in an insistence on showcasing the best of the region, which applies to beverages as well as to food. And it there's, too, in the fact that, together with his parents, he built this restaurant himself - from pouring the slabs to irrigating the kitchen garden. Arrive early enough and you are likely to find him or one of his team in that garden, picking herbs for that night's dinner.

**THE ROOMS** Twelve unpretentious rooms are ranged alongside the restaurant, each one kitted out with a queen bed and pared-back interiors. Instead of the usual designer furniture, expect natural rustic features such as tree branches adorning the walls.

**THE FOOD** Biota's tasting menus always feature an element of surprise. You may be asked to tuck into kangaroo curry straight off the bone, or find yourself digging through charcoal and foraged herbs to discover a treasure of smoked roe and scampi beneath. Follow up in the morning with a simple brunch that, weather permitting, can be served on a picnic rug by the lake.

**THE STAY** Ask Viles about the Southern Highlands and he will wax lyrical about how much there is to see and do in the area. That may explain why the rooms at Biota are on the simple side. Viles doesn't want you holing up in them; he wants you out and about. Your compact room is a comfortable place to sleep. No more. No less.

**DON'T MISS** Cocktails include some top choices - perhaps a lavender martini, or a pepperry Collins?

**ESSENTIALS** From \$460 for a weekend stay and dine package, including one night's accommodation, a five-course tasting menu for two and breakfast. 18 Kangaloon Road, Bowral. Phone (02) 4862 2005. See [biotadining.com](http://biotadining.com); [visitnsw.com](http://visitnsw.com)

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