



Words **Lindy Alexander** Photography **Peter Tarasiuk**

# Culinary



# Gold

Just north of Melbourne is Australia's first Unesco City of Gastronomy, where great food is served with a side of history



**T**here's a queue forming quickly beneath a navy-blue marquee at the Castlemaine Farmers Market. An older woman, seeing that the straggly line has forked, shepherds people into single file. "I don't want any of you to miss out on the milk," she exclaims.

The milk she's referring to is from Stellar Farmhouse Creamery, an organic micro-dairy in the orchard town of Harcourt, an hour and a half north of Melbourne. The creamery only has a handful of dairy cows, so there's a limited supply of milk but an abundance of keen customers. At the front of the queue, glass bottles clink as people swap their empty containers for those filled with fresh milk, marvelling at the inch-deep cream at the top.

It's a sunny Wednesday afternoon and the small weekly market in central Victoria is buzzing with people. Further down, the fragrant scent of strawberries drifts through the air. I wander over to the stall where a man is gently placing the heart-shaped fruit onto cardboard trays. He hands me a plump berry and I bite into it. It's just like the sun-ripened strawberries from my childhood in Melbourne – deep red and sweet. I buy two trays to take home.

This thriving market is just one of many examples of the quality of produce this region yields. Once known for its rich goldfields, the greater Bendigo region, of which Castlemaine and Harcourt are part, is now renowned for its plentiful culinary riches. In October 2019, Bendigo was designated Australia's first Unesco City of Gastronomy, joining other food destinations including Chengdu in China, Parma in Italy and Phuket in Thailand. Bendigo is now part of a network of 246 Unesco Creative Cities awarded for excellence in the fields of gastronomy, music, literature, crafts and folk art, design, media arts and film. And while the Greater Bendigo region has abundant restaurants, bars, bakeries, farmers markets, wineries, breweries and community gardens, the City of Gastronomy designation also takes into account the area's Indigenous history, culinary heritage, food innovation and sustainability.

What makes this region unique is not the number of world-class restaurants, but the way food connects people. Not only is local produce heavily featured on restaurant and café menus, there are also cooking clubs focusing on food literacy and food security, groups of marginalised and vulnerable individuals engaged in gardening and projects rehabilitating the natural environment.



**This spread, from left:** More than 50 producers show up at Castlemaine Farmers Market; fresh cherries on display; geese at Harcourt Organic Farming Co-op



Bendigo itself is an inland city of 115,000 people, 150km north of Melbourne, but the City of Gastronomy title encompasses an area of 17,000km<sup>2</sup>, from the Macedon Ranges in the south to the Murray River in the north, which is Victoria's border with New South Wales. The region is home to over 130 wineries and breweries, and in 2017 nearly 3,000 businesses were engaged with different aspects of gastronomy, leading to an industry worth AU\$1.6 billion.

"The City of Gastronomy basically covers the cultural lands of the traditional owners, the Dja Dja Wurrung," says Trevor Budge, the manager of regional sustainable development for the City of Greater Bendigo. "This region has it all – vegetables, fruit, meat, dairy, grains, cheese, wine, beer – and we are also working on projects to restore Indigenous food plants to connect with the cultural heritage of the area and recover a sustainable food system that's thousands of years old."

For tens of thousands of years Indigenous Australians thrived throughout the country but in regional Victoria this was upended by pastoral settlement in the 1830s. When gold mining began in the 1850s, it brought waves of European and

Chinese migrants, which further disrupted the ancient ecosystem. Reconciliation and healing are now discussed openly across Australia, and the City of Gastronomy title is an opportunity for traditional owners and the wider community to collaborate by sharing a regional gastronomy story focused on the growing, sourcing, cooking and sharing of food. "The title isn't just about good restaurants, but the way food is intricately linked with history and health," Trevor says. "Even our events, like the Bendigo Writers Festival or White Night (where the city centre is transformed by colourful projections and art installations), have strong gastronomy themes."

Dja Dja Wurrung artist Drew Berick co-designed Bendigo's City of Gastronomy logo, a series of six concentric rings representing the six Indigenous seasons. "Food is important for all cultures and the six seasons were hugely important and significant for Indigenous people," said Drew at the City of Gastronomy launch. Each of the six seasons reflects the abundance of certain plants or animals, such as *murrnong* (yam daisy), *gurri* (kangaroo), *warrap* (cod) and *wai-kalk* (wattle). "These seasons represent a time when my ancestors would have had



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tail terrine, for instance, is served with crisp sourdough “bark” that is baked at Blumes Historic Bakery in Harcourt.

In a woodfired Scotch oven that’s been in use for around 145 years, Jodie Pillinger, the owner and baker at Blumes, supplies Masons and other restaurants in the region with her baked goods, as well as selling direct from a charming red-brick building encircled by grape vines and rose bushes.

The morning I meet Jodie, she’s dropping cake batter studded with plump, organic dried fruit into small tins. “We’re seeing a revival of country towns starting to restore their beautiful Scotch ovens,” she says. “Years ago, country bakeries couldn’t compete with sliced white bread, but now people want to eat food that is sustainable and wholesome.”

Small rural bakeries like Blumes are also reviving traditional types of Australian bread that were once commonplace, but were decommissioned as commercial bakeries became more widespread. Working with Jodie is legendary baker John Downes, who has mastered the art of barm bread, where yeast from ale is fermented overnight,

to move onto country [from place to place] in order to access these things,” Drew added.

At Masons of Bendigo, a chic restaurant in the city’s CBD, there’s Indigenous artwork by young Dja Dja Wurrung entrepreneur Sharlee Dunolly-Lee on the lids of the tea canisters. I chat with effervescent chef and owner Sonia Anthony while she delicately spoons the tea into individual teapots. “These three teas use Indigenous flavours blended by Sharlee and Auntie Julie McHale, who is an Indigenous elder,” Sonia says. “Auntie Julie grows lots of the spices and herbs herself.”

I sip on the green tea with lemon myrtle, ginger and native lemongrass, which is rich and smoky, while the chai blended with wattleseed and pepperberry has a spicy warmth that builds slowly.

“I see the restaurant as a soap box,” Sonia says. “It’s a space where I can champion local producers. Knowing who grows your food makes it taste so much better.”

The thick belt of producers listed on the menu at Masons is a who’s who of regional artisans. There’s the beef sourced from just 40 minutes outside Bendigo, fresh vegetables from a local not-for-profit social enterprise, organic goat’s cheese from the rocky hills of Sutton Grange and tender meadow-grazed chicken raised among the lush ironbark forests of Graytown.

Each dish at the restaurant gives you a glimpse into the depth of food stories in this area, and the connections that Sonia has forged with local producers, growers and artisans. Masons’ kangaroo

**Left to right:** Masons of Bendigo’s seasonal menu features 70 locally grown products; Masons’ chef-owner Sonia Anthony



**CO-OP GOLD**

In the small town of Harcourt, an organic farming revolution is taking place. The Harcourt Organic Farming Cooperative is a collaboration between a diverse group of farmers who lease land on a single farm. There’s a micro-dairy; a fruit orchard growing stone fruit, apples and pears; vegetable growers; and a heritage fruit tree nursery. [hofcoop.com.au/home](http://hofcoop.com.au/home)



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producing a moreish, springy loaf. “It’s like sourdough bread, but without the sour,” John says. “It’s much more complex to make than sourdough. We think we’re the only ones in Australia doing it. Many Aussies grew up eating this kind of bread and when they try ours, it’s so evocative for them.”

In fact, looking at all the loaves stacked on the weathered timber shelves at Blumes feels like stepping back in time – from the shiny dark crust of the brack (traditional Irish fruit bread) to the tangy sourdough loaves and old English buns. This sense of nostalgia permeates throughout the region, especially in Bendigo’s CBD with its renowned art gallery and heritage-listed buildings.

While the gleaming subway tiles and timber tables of Harvest Food & Wine in the heart of the Bendigo art district are undeniably modern, part of the region’s history is served with each of the bistro’s dishes. The flaky, buttery homemade croissants and pastries (made daily by owner and pastry chef Marsha Busse), the seasonal salads and European rotisserie lunches are served on beautiful plates and bowls from Bendigo Pottery, which is Australia’s oldest working ceramics studio.

“It’s great using plates that have a local connection,” says Lincoln Riley, winemaker and sommelier, co-owner of Harvest and Marsha’s husband. “And the food we put on these plates is really simple in that there’s no trickery, but it’s fresh, homely and delicious. And a lot of hard work goes into achieving that each day.”

Hard work and history. It’s a thread that’s woven throughout the stories of the bakers, millers, growers, farmers, cooks, winemakers and cheesemakers in this region. Peter Cobb is part of a

**Left to right:** Jodie Pillinger; inside Harvest Food & Wine; Marsha Busse and Lincoln Riley; homemade croissants

120-year-old tradition at Laucke Flour Mills on the banks of the Loddon River, as general manager of one of Australia’s few remaining family-owned flour milling operations. “Grains have a terroir, just like wine does,” he says. “Depending on the variety, soil and local climate, grains will taste like the region they were grown in.”

Getting a true taste of a gastronomic region often means hitting the road and talking to locals about where excellent food experiences can be found. “This area has access to all kinds of superb local produce, rather than being great at just one thing,” Peter says. “If you imagine Bendigo as the centre of a clock face, sweep the hands around and wherever they land you’ll find a vibrant food culture and bountiful produce that changes by the season.”

 **Malaysia Airlines flies XXXX weekly between Kuala Lumpur and Melbourne.**



**WHERE TO EAT**

**Masons of Bendigo**  
For fine dining that showcases some of the best produce the region has to offer. The husband-and-wife team’s menu evolves with the seasons.  
[masonsofbendigo.com.au](http://masonsofbendigo.com.au) | 25 Queen St, Bendigo

**Super Hero Banh Mi**  
Bite into crunchy baguettes filled with five-spice chicken or pillowy bao with sticky wok-fried tofu. Also look out for vegan options.  
[superherobanhmi.com](http://superherobanhmi.com) | 16 Hargraves St, Castlemaine

**du Fermier**  
Step inside a restaurant that feels more like a bespoke French farmhouse for spectacular seasonal dishes.  
[anniesmithers.com.au/du-fermier](http://anniesmithers.com.au/du-fermier) | 42 High St, Trentham

For more information about Bendigo as a Unesco City of Gastronomy: [bendigogastronomy.com.au](http://bendigogastronomy.com.au)