



**KELLY GANG**

A collection of Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly prints hanging in the hotel's bar nods to the bushranger's High Country exploits. Opposite: The fluted check-in desk is wrapped in gold-hued mosaic tiles and topped by a vintage desk lamp.

VICTORIA

# HIGH FIDELITY



An impeccably refurbished country retreat in north-eastern Victoria shines a new light on this bountiful region. In a first look at Lancemore Milawa, *Travel + Luxury* discovers the ideal base from which to explore the area's gourmet, viticultural and artistic attractions.

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**URBANE LIVING**  
From top: The bar is clad in Indonesian pebble and topped with black granite; the outdoor terrace; tortellini parcels of Milawa goat's cheese with sapphire potato crisps.



Daybreak in the King Valley and all is still. The first slivers of light stream through the clouds, falling on frost-encrusted fields and grapevines, making them glint like gemstones. Within minutes, as if turning a dial, the soft, pastel cast turns coruscating. The silver blanket of ice begins to melt, revealing patches of green grass, and the wings of rosellas flash crimson as they flit between the vines. I watch this pastoral scene unfurl from my balcony at the refreshed Lancemore Milawa in Victoria's High Country. Just under three hours from Melbourne, the sleepy region – striped with vineyards and patched with farmland – has been reanimated with stellar digs that offer the intimacy of a private home.

In 2001, wine producer Brown Brothers approached hoteliers Peter and Jan Clark about establishing a stay across from its esteemed Milawa vineyards. Two decades later and the time was right for a multimillion-dollar transformation of the 40-room property. “The location of the hotel means guests are immediately connected to the epicurean and natural draws of the region,” says Julian Clark, Lancemore Group CEO and Peter and Jan's son. “With our new look we wanted to really celebrate the High Country.” From the arched windows that capture mountain vistas to the light-filled communal areas, moving through the hotel feels like you're constantly in communion with the landscape.

The group engaged Melbourne-based Hana Hakim of The Stella Collective for the facelift. The Syrian-British designer is known for pared-back yet polished interiors that revel in intricate details and voluptuous curves. An oversized Moroccan urn in the reception sets the tone, its lyrical form echoed throughout the property: in the fluted waves of the tiled front desk; in the sinuous banquettes in the bar; and the geometric twists of the pool. “We sought to create a romantic escape from the city,” Hakim says. “In winter the property warms you beautifully with cosy fires inside and out, and in summer there's a sense of long days by the pool and in the vineyard.” Hakim has an eye for knockout lighting: in the lounge is a dramatic steel chandelier formed by pewter palm leaves that marries Hollywood Regency, modern coastal and faintly surreal styles.

A refreshed rooftop terrace is still being tweaked on my visit, and the sunny courtyard arrayed with festoon lights makes an ideal spot for aperitivo hour. But the area that calls to me most is by the vines, where I sink into a plush lounger, warmed by the crackling fire pit. There's a sense of warmth throughout the property, so it could be seen as a bold move, given its proximity to snow-capped peaks, to incorporate polished concrete floors. But it's a decision that works, both from a cleanliness perspective and from an aesthetic one. The concrete has a tonal softness offset by layers of earthy textures and printed accessories.



**COCOONING RETREAT**  
Guest rooms feature a blend of textures, including patterned blankets, plush seating and natural-fibre rugs.



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In the casually elegant guest rooms and suites, which stretch over the property’s two storeys, rich teak consoles are paired with oversized sand-hued love seats. Swirling blankets add visual punch, as do brass sconces and sisal rugs. Guests can choose between sunrise rooms, overlooking vines and green pastures to the alpine peaks beyond, or sunset ones, where you gaze onto manicured gardens and vineyards. The former have access to an undivided balcony that stretches the length of the building, while the latter ground-floor residences lead directly out onto gardens. There are also two generous spa suites on either side of the hotel.

A retro bar fridge in the guest rooms lends a playful touch and also points to one of the drawcards of the Milawa region – exceptional food and wine. Aaron Jose is the executive chef at the hotel’s restaurant, Merlot, and it’s here I taste some of the area’s best produce. A highlight is creamy chèvre cheese from Milawa Cheese Company in delicate tortellini served with spinach butter and local Woodland mushrooms. The seasonal menu is full of similar bull’s-eyes from local producers, such as Harrierville smoked trout with cavolo-nero pesto risotto and King Valley Angus eye-fillet with potato dauphinoise and the fresh Alpine walnuts packed in a crisp baklava cigar with mini pavlova. My meal is expertly paired with standout wines from Brown Brothers, Billy Button and Piano Piano.

Next to the dining room is a sophisticated and moody bar featuring a selection of rare Sidney Nolan Ned Kelly prints. The Victorian High Country was Kelly’s stomping ground and it’s as though his renegade spirit keeps watch over the hotel. “The Ned Kelly story is so significant to this region that we wanted to make sure the rare prints were situated for everyone to enjoy,” Hakim says. There are 15 in total. “Seeing people gather at the bar, local beers in hand, with those Kelly images nearby feels like art in itself.”

Along with its stellar produce, this corner of north-east Victoria has a thriving cultural scene. The next morning I drive 30 minutes south of Milawa to Benalla Art Gallery, a striking modernist building overlooking Lake Benalla. Overseen by director Eric Nash, the complex is an ever-evolving exploration of creativity spanning contemporary installations to historically significant artworks. Nash takes me through The Ledger Gallery, which is currently showing 212 works from the gallery’s first major benefactors, Laurie Ledger MBE and his wife, Erma. The impressive salon-style exhibition contains recognisable names, such as Arthur Streeton, Albert Namatjira, Margaret Preston and Grace Crowley. The result is a breathtaking exposition, depicting dramatic seascapes, a celebration of women artists – whose artworks hang prominently at eye level – and urban life.

Another town where art is threaded through the streets is Beechworth, 25 minutes north of



**ARTFUL BLEND**

Above: The Benalla Art Gallery’s collection of Australian art dates from the early 19th century to today. Left: A lounge area at the hotel overlooking the vines. Opposite: Unwind at the pool after a day hopping to vineyards and galleries.








**BIG CHEESE**  
Above: Temptations  
abound at nearby Milawa  
Cheese Company. Right:  
A cellar at Brown Brothers  
whose vineyard is steeped  
in history. Opposite: the  
hotel’s design injects  
dramatic flourishes such  
as this chandelier into  
monochromatic spaces.



Milawa. The beautiful destination, laced with honey-coloured heritage buildings, was recently transformed into a huge outdoor gallery with the arrival of a new biennial event, the Beechworth Contemporary Art Award. Ten artists responded to historic sites and landmark buildings throughout the town and revealed works that are vibrant, topical and compelling. Projected onto the façade of Beechworth’s old hospital, an LED clock counting down to 2030 – the year when it’s predicted the planet’s temperature will exceed 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels – by Yandell Walton makes a commanding statement about the Earth’s fragility. In the old town hall, Susie Losch’s installation *Swell* uses inflatable sculptures made from recycled fabrics to encourage the idea of breath as a transformational force.

With Lancemore Milawa as my comfortable base, I discover just how much this region has going for it. A dégustation lunch at Brown Brothers starts with a glass of zesty prosecco, accompanied by thick slices of house-made sourdough served with a punchy, herbaceous olive oil with vegetable trimmings (leaves of leeks and onion skins). We then traverse the spoils of the kitchen garden with golden pucks of crumpet scattered with fennel pollen and green olive, new-season asparagus, lithe and yielding under a smoked koji butter, and salt-baked celeriac with pickled pine mushrooms. Each course is paired with some of the vineyard’s best drops, including the crisp Patricia chardonnay and a young, vibrant fiano.

At the Milawa Cheese Company, I can’t resist tucking multiple cheeses, including the outstanding King River Gold, into my cool bag. (Conveniently, Lancemore is developing a cheese concierge who will deliver your goodies back to the hotel.) Further on, at the end of a dirt road flanked by verdant paddocks where lambs skittered about, I meet Simon Brooke-Taylor, a craft gin distiller at Hurdle Creek Still. “I’m the Banksy of the gin world,” Brooke-Taylor tells me as he pours neat shots of the spirit. Whereas other craft gin distillers buy in their base spirit, he proudly makes his from scratch to smuggle the rich flavours of local grain into the gin’s DNA so his base spirit is full of character, like the famed street artist’s works.

That evening, with a cocktail made with Brooke-Taylor’s distinctive Yardarm gin in my hand, I take the small domed carry light from my room for a lantern as I walk out to the vines. The fire pits are glowing and other guests are settling in nearby with a glass of red. Above the mountains, a throng of cockatoos squawk and flash white against the crepuscular sky. Cool air rushes into my lungs. I hold my breath, wishing to grasp onto this moment in the High Country forever.   
*The writer was a guest of the Lancemore Group.*

