



CLOCKWISE: Farm-to-fork dishes, sampling local wines, scaling the Diamond Tree, on the truffle hunt, apples for the picking at Newton Orchards, wine tasting, Coleen Roberts of CharCol Springs.



WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Manjimup Perth

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The secret life of farmers

A paddock-to-plate experience in WA offers a new appreciation for the land and its produce

WORDS LAURA WATERS



PHOTOGRAPHY CRAIG KINDER FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY, THE TRUFFLE & WINE CO., NEWTON ORCHARDS

There's a region nestled amid towering

karri forests 300km south of Perth, a kind of Shangri-La where everything seems to thrive. Where vines grow heavy with grapes, crops are abundant and families have remained for generations dedicating energy and passion to the business of growing.

"You can plant anything here. I love it," says Vic Peos, farmer and co-owner of Peos Estate vineyard. He's referring to the soil, cool climate, generous rainfall and surrounding trees that act as a natural barrier against pests and disease.

Over four days I'm on a quest to meet some of the farmers who call this area home. The Genuinely Extraordinary Southern Forests Food and Farm Experience is not an opportunity you get every day. These people are the real deal, producing 70 per cent of the country's avocados, half of the state's apples, 90 per cent of its potatoes and the largest bounty of black truffles in the Southern Hemisphere. This is the ultimate paddock-to-plate experience – not only will I see what they do, but I'll taste it too.

Food trails

Manjimup is our base and we begin with a visit to the local farmers' market to get a glimpse of the region's offerings. This is a tour that changes with the seasons, taking a behind-the-scenes look at any of the 50 different fruits, vegetables, nuts, beef, sheep, dairy and gourmet foods produced here.

I'm keen to visit the Truffle & Wine Co., the largest producer of Périgord black truffles in the world, supplying renowned chefs such as Shannon Bennett and Heston Blumenthal. Technology, science, hard work and a blessed climate is the secret to its success, explains head of sales Alex Wilson, as he places a cool nugget in the palm of my hand. Its pungent aroma is easily sniffed out by the trained labradors who roam up and down the truffière's 15,000 oak and hazelnut trees. "We use dogs here in Australia, not pigs – though some of them border on piggy-tendencies," Alex says. "You won't find a skinny lab around here during truffle season, I assure you."

It seems there's a lot of "peering over the fence" in this business and on a recent trip to France, Alex spoke with a farmer chuffed with his 30kg harvest dug from a >

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five-hectare property. "I told him we got over six tonnes from our 20-hectare truffière last year. I actually think I saw a little tear forming."

In the on-site Truffle Restaurant, Italian chef Alberto Zocca shaves truffle over gnocchi, stirs it through creamy risotto and even mixes it through a panna cotta, and the flavour is both subtle and bold. There is nothing else quite like it, and I guess that's the attraction.

Happy hens

At our next stop, CharCol Springs egg farm, I meet Charlie Roberts, eyes twinkling above a bushy red beard. "What's the difference between free range and pastured eggs?" he challenges us. A lot, it seems. Charlie's pastured hens are constantly on the move, grazing behind fields of cattle. "The best example in nature is the nomadic wildebeest, migrating with the birds following behind them to clean up the bugs and grubs, spreading manure as they go," he explains. It's a style of farming that is highly sustainable and

regenerative to the soils, and the end result is a nutrient-rich, healthy and super-tasty egg.

After pulling on sterile shoe covers, I am free to wander the fields. Each brood of 500 hens has one-tenth of a hectare to roam – five times more than an average free-range farm – but for some reason they all choose to cluster around me, gently but persistently pecking at my shoelaces. The visit is a hands-on experience; collecting the eggs and checking them for cracks over a backlit conveyor belt, then having my first attempt at milking a cow, which was surprisingly successful under Charlie's expert tuition.

Lunch at Jarrah Jacks Brewery involves platters of melt in the mouth lamb and antipasto, accompanied by tasting paddles of beer. At Lost Lake, winemaker Ashley Lewkowski walks us through the production process, splashing mouthfuls of pinot noir and shiraz into our glasses as we wander the cellar, before sitting us down to



CLOCKWISE: En route to a truffle hunt, prized local blue marron, Charlie Roberts with a fresh pail of milk at CharCol Springs farm, truffle-flavoured dishes, brewery tastings, inside the shearing shed.



Local delicacy

into the forests to get a closer look at the native karri trees that so define the region. The air is clean and cool, the pale trunks tall and arrow-straight. It's no surprise there's a history of logging here, with sawmills in Manjimup and Pemberton closing only a year ago after more than a century of operation. Today, the forests draw tourists, and I sense a peace and purity surrounded by these aged giants.

The 49m-tall Diamond Tree was used as a fire lookout tower until 1974, and it's still possible to reach the platform nestled in its canopy by scaling dozens of steel pegs hammered in a giant swirl around its mighty trunk. I'm focused closely on the rungs, which edge on vertical in places, but I let my gaze wander between them to the ever-diminishing forest floor far below and suddenly my legs turn to jelly.

We follow up with a wander around the Cascades, where the Lefroy Brook rushes over huge granite slabs, cutting a path through damp, moss-covered forest. In spring, orchids and other wildflowers enhance the scenery. >>

a feast of poached marron with fennel, red onion and Bravo apple slaw with finger lime.

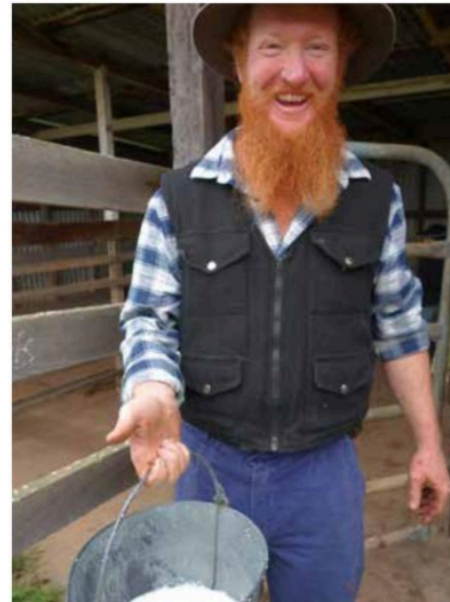
I confess to having no idea what a marron was until this moment but, luckily, I get the lowdown from Dave Evans at Forest Fresh Marron. These native freshwater crayfish are farmed sustainably in local dams and ponds, then delivered to Dave where they grow in giant tubs until reaching marketable size. In a draughty shed I peer over these critters of varying sizes, in shades of reddish-brown and a striking royal blue.

In the treetops

All this eating warrants a little exercise so we head



PHOTOGRAPHY: CRAIG KINDER FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY, LAURA WATERS, GENUINELY EXTRAORDINARY SOUTHERN FORESTS FOOD AND FARM EXPERIENCE





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Need to know

THE GENUINELY EXTRAORDINARY SOUTHERN FORESTS FOOD AND FARM EXPERIENCE

Begins Friday evening and runs to noon Monday on the first weekend of every month, coinciding with the Manjimup Farmers' Market.

Cost: \$1485 single, \$1285 twin share

Includes four-day/three-night all-inclusive tour with accommodation at the Kingsley Motel Manjimup, minibus transport, local representatives and all meals.
southernforestsfood.com

Getting There: Tours depart from Manjimup, a 3.5-hour drive south of Perth. Self-drive or catch a bus (\$101pp round trip).

Behind-the-scenes farm visits can only be done on tour, however self-drive anytime to visit the truffle farm, wineries, restaurants and forests of the region.

When: Anytime is a good time. Produce varies with the seasons.

Tip: Truffle season is end of May to mid-August. Wildflowers bloom August to November.

On the farm trail

Back on the food trail we wander through the packing house at Newton Orchards, watching rows and rows of apples gently bobbing along in shallow water baths to avoid bruising as they are sorted by size. Newton, which has been family owned and operated for more than 85 years, created the hugely popular Pink Lady apple and more recently the Bravo, a dark-skinned,

It's been a privilege to peek into the world of farming, to meet the characters

pale-fleshed creation.

Our final feast is at gastropub Tall Timbers, and by now I've given up on restraint. Chargrilled sirloin steak with black pepper butter, sautéed cabbage with smoked bacon and hazelnut dukkah – everything

sprinkled with those precious shavings of truffle. Served with award-winning drops from nearby Woodgate Wines, food this good is not to be shunned.

It's been a privilege to peek into the world of farming, to meet the characters who live and breathe the land and who no doubt produce some of the food that I eat back home. I've gained a tonne of insights under their guidance — and maybe one or two kilos as well. ✈

Laura Waters was hosted by the Southern Forests Food Council Inc.



The Tall Timbers gastropub. ABOVE: Bravo apples from Newton Orchards, which is also responsible for the Pink Lady.

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Perth and extensive car hire options.

To book, visit JETSTAR.COM