



press clip

Beauty bottler

The Yarra Valley is so close to Melbourne, yet you can feel a million miles away, writes **BLANCHE CLARK**

IT'S Monday morning and I've slept in. A momentary panic about being late for work is subsumed by sensory reminders that I have escaped the rat race to wallow in luxury on the outskirts of Melbourne. In two hours I will be lying on a massage table sampling a 60-minute Natskin Signature Massage at Balgownie Estate, but first there's a view to admire and a buffet breakfast to consume.

As I push back the curtains, the Yarra Valley glides into view; its vineyard vistas roll into taupe and topaz hills dotted with huts, trees, dams, and windbreaks, while the Dandenong Ranges dominate the distance.

In the bathroom, I'm like Narcissus staring at his reflection in the water. Yesterday I had the "anti-age collagen" facial, described as "a peri medical facial which offers the ultimate in anti-wrinkle treatment".

I swear my face is plumper. That congregation of creases that sit resolutely like self-righteous parishioners around my eyes and mouth have relaxed. It's almost sinful.

I decide to consolidate my transformation with a 1.6km walk, following the trail at the rear of the estate.

It also justifies having a three-course breakfast at Rae's Restaurant, because how can I choose between Bircher muesli, pancakes, and bacon and eggs?

I ignore the discomfort that suggests I might be still digesting the four-course dinner from the night before. One of the beauties of staying at Balgownie Estate is you can try a different wine with every course and you don't have to drive home.

Winemaker Stuart Anderson established Balgownie Estate in Bendigo in 1969, when commercial viticulture was starting to take off in Australia.

When Des and Rod Forrester took over the business they added a 7ha paddock in the Yarra Valley, planting new vines and building the retreat featuring 69 spa suites for accommodation, a day spa, conference centre and cellar door.

Balgownie Estate's samples are still complimentary at cellar door. You can try wines, such as the Estate Shiraz, made from the original 40-year-old Bendigo vines, or sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and pinot noir from the younger Yarra Valley vines.

One of the best experiences is the sublime combination of Brix single origin Ghanaian chocolate

with a full-bodied wine, such as the 2011 Estate Shiraz. A few shavings of this chocolate offset the tannins in the red wine, creating an oh-so-smooth drink.

There are also the museum releases, which are only available at cellar door. These aren't part of the tastings, but you may be willing to part with \$125 for the 1995 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon.

But a stay at Balgownie Estate is not all about wine. Relaxation is at the heart of business.

The Natskin Spa Retreat invites you into the hedonistic world of fluffy bath robes, soft music, subdued lighting and aromatherapy. Hayley is my masseuse extraordinaire, a master of soothing, rhythmical strokes. A dreamy nonchalance takes over, setting the tone for the day.

There is no urgency as we drive away from the estate. We wend our way through Kinglake National Park, where green is again the predominant colour, six years after the Black Saturday fires.

We eventually circle back to Healesville. There are numerous great cafes, but Harvest Cafe wins with its rave-worthy concoctions made from fresh seasonal produce, including Jerusalem artichoke soup and a roll of cos lettuce, smoked Buxton trout, preserved lemon, capers and cress.

My mini holiday is topped off with a visit to Kitchen & Butcher, buying duck rissoles, Delice du Poitou (goat's cheese coated in fine layers of ash and white mould), a jar of chermoula, fresh free-range eggs and bread.

It ensures that when I return home that night I have a veritable feast, further delaying thoughts of my inevitable return to the rat race.



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THE DEAL STAYING THERE

Balgownie Estate Vineyard Resort and Spa is offering 50 per cent off rack rates, from \$175 room only, Sunday to Thursday, until August 31.

A Winter Warmer package includes overnight accommodation in a one-bedroom spa suite and complimentary wine tasting of Balgownie wines. The resort has a free Yarra Valley Experience VIP Car Service to wineries and attractions every Saturday.
Ph: 9730 0700
balgownieestate.com.au





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Grape escape: Balgownie Estate (left) offers relaxation amid luxury, while their cellar door (above) is a taste temptation.