

Gourmet Escape

Margaret River's exclusive wine and dine event is one hell of a way to experience Australia's eclectic vineyards and its exciting dining scene. Book your ticket for the 2017 edition right away!

wine bars, microbreweries and restaurants to keep you busy for a few days. I particularly liked Shadow Wine Bar and the always-busy Northbridge Brewing Co. Their al fresco area is perfect, especially just an hour or two before sunset. The Central Business District and Northbridge areas offer several dining and drinking options and the city almost always has some festival or event being staged.

The relatively new COMO The Treasury Hotel is the

world's biggest food and beverage festival that draws in people from all over the world.

Held in mid-November, the festival, set in the Gourmet Village located within the stunning grounds of the Leeuwin Estate, hosts numerous events at wineries, breweries, gardens and beaches for three indulgent days. The smaller happenings, termed satellite and fringe events, are all ticketed. Chefs from Australia's best restaurants and celebrity chefs from across the world



Gourmet Village is peppered with large tents that house multiple producers of food, wine, craft beer and cheese

Australia offers a diverse range of culinary experiences in restaurants and vineyards, set amidst awe-inspiring natural beauty. I have explored Australia's wine scene earlier too, when I was on a scholarship to study their offerings. But this time, my destination was the Gourmet Escape in Margaret River, in the western part of Australia.

I'm actually trying hard to critique the region but really, I can't come up with anything negative to say. It's yet a virgin destination, waiting to be discovered. If you were to head

south from Margaret River, you would reach Antarctica; towards the west is South Africa. A five-hour flight eastwards would get you to Melbourne. This is how secluded Margaret River is.

To get there, I flew Business Class courtesy Qantas from Singapore to Perth. The five-hour flight went by in a luxurious blur as I drank Penfolds Bin 28, a full-bodied, indulgent wine, and ate multiple courses for dinner before nodding off to a kingly sleep.

Northbridge, a relaxed neighbourhood in Perth where I stayed, is studded with enough

place to bed in, not just because it's luxurious but also because of its myriad dining options. Wildflower, their flagship restaurant, offers you the perfect opportunity to sample Australia's innovative dining scene. Here, the menu changes every season and Executive Chef Jed Gerrard creates magic with his farmer-and-forager driven menu. The view is spectacular too. Also super is the Petition Wine Bar.

From Perth, I headed down to Margaret River, which is about a three-hour drive, to participate in Gourmet Escape (gourmetescape.com.au), the

fly in to host pop-up dinners, tastings and master classes in collaboration with the region's best wineries and microbreweries, bringing together international and home-grown talent.

Rates differ, depending on the event, but it can range from AU\$180 to AU\$300 per person, per lunch or dinner. The complete Gourmet Escape experience costs over AU\$1500-2000 per person. In the past, global haute chefs who have hosted the various pop-up events included Nigella Lawson and Ashley Palmer-Watts of Dinner by Heston Blumenthal.



Savour food that is cooked in front of you by MasterChefs from around the world and paired with wines from some of the best wineries of the region



Celebrity chefs like Nigella Lawson have hosted pop-up dinners at the event

Honestly, the numbers of events are far too many, and I would recommend booking early to get tickets to the ones you want to go to.

Gourmet Escape's launch party at Castle Bay Beach, along the scenic beach, was quite an evening. Star chefs from Australia, winery owners and media descended for an evening of revelry. I had it easy—cool sand, clear water in astonishing colours of blue and green, and teepee tents on the beach, lit with warm lights.

With an array of food being cooked on a barbecue right in front of you and wines from some of the best wineries of the region in free flow, there was nothing more we could have asked for. The beach seemed out of Tourism Australia's television commercials.

Gourmet Village will baffle you with its sheer enormity. The space is filled with large tents that house multiple producers of food, wine, craft beer and cheese. Once in, eat and drink your way throughout the day as live bands play music in various nooks and corners. I particularly liked the idea of setting up a picnic spot next to the vineyards, adjacent to where

the village was set up. I had access to the platinum lounge (you can buy it for AU\$250) and my ticket got me two glasses of Leeuwin Estate wine, which I used to wash down the copious amounts of oysters that were being shucked on the spot.

One of the satellite events I attended was called The Long Lunch at Fraser Gallop Estate, priced at AU\$305. It reminded me of a grand Bordeaux Chateau luncheon experience in the middle of wine country. They produce excellent Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay from their vineyards in Wilyabrup, which were paired with a four-course stellar lunch. Chef Guillaume Brahimi of the eponymous Guillaume in Sydney, and Bistro Guillaume in multiple cities in Australia, created a brilliant menu for the afternoon, which included King Fish and Eel paired with a beautiful Chardonnay, Wagyu Beef paired with three vintages of Cabernet Sauvignon, and dessert comprising of raspberry, pistachio, white chocolate and blackcurrant that was paired with ice-pressed Chardonnay, all of which put me into a very

gentle food-and-wine coma.

A highlight of the trip would have to be the tasting I attended at the historical Vasse Felix. I sampled their full-range with their head sommelier who knew the wines from the estate inside out. I was blown away, especially by their sparkling, the Cabernet Sauvignon from their premier range and the iconic Heytesbury blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec and Petit Verdot. These, along with a host of other wineries like Moss Wood, Cullen, Howard Park, Woodlands, Leeuwin and Voyager produce head-turning Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, and I would put them at the top with the world's best.

I recommend staying in Margaret River town if you like some action. The town centre is small but has some great restaurants, bars and even a microbrewery. On this trip, however, I stayed at the luxurious Bunker Bay Resorts by Pullman, which is on Bunker Bay beach. I was told that at select times of the year, you can see whales swimming past the resort as they come up for air from the under the sea surface. At night, I'd be back

from the festivities and enjoy a glass of wine or three at the bar terrace, watching a million stars in the night sky. I even saw the largest moon in 70 years rising from the sea; and what a spectacle! I'd go back just to see that again.

You would need to rent a car since distances between venues can be large and a taxi ride will be eye-wateringly expensive. Visit the region's wineries and their fantastic restaurants, or head to the beach and set up a barbecue, or just simply enjoy a glass of vino or two as the sun sets. Margaret River is a beautiful part of the world and the region should be on your list of must-visit places for food and wine, especially during Gourmet Escape. **E**



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