

Wine Margaret River



WINE DELIGHTS: The cellar door at Howard Park.

Pictures: Ken Martin

Meet Margaret and mellow out

Good things gravitate to this special part of the west, writes **Karen Reymont**

FROM the window of my westward flight, Australia's belly was coloured topaz, raw sugar and buttermilk. Nearing the far side, the land was replaced by a gilded strip of sand and an ocean of blue, tin-shed roofs seared reflections into the sky. And then I was there, cocooned in

Margaret River's melange of white sand, rolling surf, rugged coast, secluded bays, forests, and vineyards – in a land of sensory indulgence.

The tide has delivered exquisite gifts to the shores of Margaret River. The region would be poorer without its surfing culture, which has lured many of the characters here.

Jeff Burch, head honcho at Howard Park Wines, was lured to Margaret River by the tide. Today, he and his family operate the Howard Park cellar door at Cowaramup where the Wilyabrup Creek, seductively lined with peppermint trees, makes its way through the vine-covered terrain.

"We were excited to have a beautiful piece of dirt for our vines," Amy Burch says.

Pascal Marchand, a Burgundian winemaker of 26 years, has collaborated with the Burchs to create Howard Park's prestige label, Marchand and Burch. Pascal uses the lunar calendar to produce wine, a method time-tested for years.

Howard Park offers wines of different prices and profiles to explore. During evenings at home, Jeff and Amy Burch enjoy a sparkling and riesling, and then move on to pinot. "Pinot is so versatile, I haven't moved away from it since I discovered

it, we do a bloody good pinot," Amy says.

Daughter Natalie believes they will see great growth in Amy's beloved pinot and sparkling.

"We're yet to see a brilliant Western Australian sparkling and we are going to do it," Natalie says.

"Bugger the boundaries, something special comes when you experiment."

The Howard Park family are excited about their muscat, so make sure you experience its essence of "fruitcake and tea" when visiting the cellar door.

Cape Lodge's larrikin chef Tony Howell is another gift from the tide, seduced to the region by surf.

He began his career at the prestigious Cape Lodge property, where management put an extra chef on and insisted he slow down.

"I became inspired, felt fresh, and enjoyed cooking so much more because I wasn't rushed. Now I have the same philosophy with my kitchen brigade," Howell says. "It's 11 years later and I'm still here and happy. I look forward to the next 10."

Many of the vegetables used in Howell's produce-driven kitchen are plucked from the organic garden just outside his restaurant door.

"I'll walk in the door with two buckets of something from the garden and say, 'OK guys what are we going to do with these?'" Howell says.

His daily menu evolves around what is plentiful and good. If produce arrives from a supplier that is not up to scratch, he will send it back in a heartbeat.

"There's an old saying," Howell says with a devilish smile. "What you start off with is what you end up with."

"I've been cooking for 16 years and the thrill hasn't worn off yet. It still gives me tingles."

Howell's visuals gave me a tingle or two. The subtly flavoured components of marron tortellini on creamed corn with sage burnt butter welcomed each other. Marron is a freshwater cray and a local culinary giant of Margaret River.

The ripe figs arrived in two guises, alongside White Rocks veal rump in a warm fig, walnut and pear salad, and in Howell's closing act, where they were sweetly and stickily toffee crusted.



DRAWN IN: The Margaret River surf brings many people – and their talents – to the area.

Breakfast overlooking the lake is quite an event. The smoked salmon rivalled any I had tried, sourced from Tasmania, and is house-smoked of course. Spongy sourdough bread is made in-house daily, others are from Tas's Bakery at nearby Dunsborough.

A walk along the expanse of Dunsborough beach with one of Tas's legendary meat pies in hand would put a glimmer of sunshine into the darkest of hearts.

General manager and connoisseur of the good life, Drew Bernhardt, is another smiling Cape Lodge staffer who's been around for years. He'll ensure your stay is a great one and is only too happy to share his tips. He suggests an "absolute waterfront"

breakfast at White Elephant Cafe on Gnarabup Beach, where the food is "good, simple and fresh".

Gnarabup is one of the best swimming beaches on the west coast and a great spot for sunset.

And the best surf beach? "That's the thing about Margaret River, it's 160km of gorgeous limestone coastline with great beach breaks all the way along," he says.

Favourite place to lunch? Bernhardt and I agree, it's Cullen Wines or the iconic Vasse Felix, the planters of the first vines in the region in 1967, and where chef Aaron Carr surpasses expectations with his endearing culinary style.

At home, sulking about having my

Margaret River jaunt behind me, I attempted to recreate Carr's legendary ajo blanco (Spanish chilled bread and almond soup). Mine lacked Carr's pizzazz, and the added pizzazz of dining on Vasse Felix's vine-entwined veranda, overlooking rows of grape heavy vines.

Sleep came easy on my last night at Cape Lodge; after three nights I was thoroughly wound down and relaxed. I woke to birdsong, and in the early morning light the marri blossom was falling from the tree tops and danced through the air like snowflakes.

I took home more than I came with – a soft spot for Margaret River and memories of the eclectic gifts carried in on the tide.

Wish you were here

Where to stay

Cape Lodge
3341 Caves Rd, Yallingup
Ph: (08) 9755 6311
capelodge.com.au

Where to eat

Vasse Felix
Cnr Caves Rd & Harmans Rd South, Cowaramup
Ph: (08) 9756 5050
www.vassefelix.com.au

Cullen Wines
Caves Rd, Cowaramup
Ph: (08) 9755 5277
www.cullenwines.com.au

Tas's Bakery
Shop 18, 34 Dunn Bay Rd, Dunsborough
Ph: (08) 9756 7122

White Elephant Beach Cafe
Gnarabup Rd, Gnarabup
Ph: (08) 9757 990
www.whiteelephantcafe.com.au

Where to sip

Howard Park Wines
Miamup Rd, Cowaramup
Ph: (08) 9756 5200
www.howardparkwines.com.au
For Margaret River information, visit www.margaretriver.com