



# Hunter Valley LOCAVORE

With two acclaimed restaurants to their name, Troy and Megan Rhoades-Brown are well placed to introduce us to the region's producers and winemakers, revealing local legends and game-changing newcomers.







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Set against the craggy Brokenback Ranges, NSW's Hunter Valley unfurls as a patchwork of eucalypts, vine-covered hills and dairy farms. It's here that Australia's first shiraz vines were planted in the 1830s, and the varietal is still one of the hallmarks of the region. With cellar doors housed in 100-year-old cottages, and wineries that have borne the same family name for four generations, there's an undeniable sense of history. Today, those old-school traditions are being tempered, if not challenged, by a band of forward-thinking producers, winemakers and restaurateurs, who bring renewed vigour to the Valley.

With a pair of one-hatted restaurants to their credit, young guns Troy and Megan Rhoades-Brown represent that fresh outlook. Not yet 30 years of age, Troy and his team behind [Muse Restaurant](#) and [Muse Kitchen](#) have set a benchmark for dining in the Hunter, offering refined food in relaxed settings.

After cutting his teeth in a family-run Italian restaurant in nearby Newcastle, Troy came to the Hunter to work for Robert Molines at his eponymous French fine diner, Robert's at Pepper Tree, where Hunter-raised Megan worked as a waitress. "Yes, it's the old waiter and chef story," says Troy. He rose through the ranks to head chef (scooping up the Brett Graham Scholarship for young chefs in the process), before branching out with



**1.** Muse Kitchen at Keith Tulloch Wine. **2.** Robert Molines. **3.** Gnocchi with white rabbit and whipped ricotta from Muse Kitchen. **4.** Chickens in the garden at Margan. **Previous page (from left):** sunset over the valley; Chateau Elan; Muse Restaurant's chargrilled wagyu with fermented cabbage, yuzu, shiitake and wasabi; Muse Restaurant; Troy and Megan at Muse Kitchen; Bistro Molines; curious locals; produce at Tinklers.



**1 & 2.** Andrew and Janet Wright of The Olive Tree Restaurant and their sand whiting with sage and serrano ham. **3.** Wyndham Estate, one of the Hunter's oldest wineries.

Megan in 2009 to open [Muse Restaurant](#) (Hungerford Hill Wines, 2450 Broke Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 6777).

"The Hunter Valley is full of great wine, food and history, mostly built on successful family businesses, which I believe has helped shape the community," says Troy. "We've worked hard to build relationships with local producers and winemakers over the years," he says. Handcrafted cheeses, freshly picked peppercorns, heirloom vegetables and honeycomb punctuate the modern menu, bolstered by house-made goods such as bacon and ricotta. And while Muse originally flew the fine-dining flag, things have loosened up of late. "We've taken away the tablecloths, and we've stripped back the menu to create a more informal experience," says Troy. Standouts include spanner crab and squid ink gnocchi, and chargrilled wagyu with fermented cabbage, yuzu, shiitake and Coppersolly wasabi.

Building on the success of Muse Restaurant, Troy and Megan launched [Muse Kitchen](#) (Cnr Hermitage and Deasys Rds, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7899) in 2011. Set in the expansive Keith Tulloch Wine estate, this country-chic eatery is all whitewashed walls, blonde woods and French provincial accents. "We teamed up with Keith and his wife, Amanda, because we share a similar ethos, and there was a demand for a quality casual lunch spot," says Megan. "It's the same produce and the same focus on seasonality as the restaurant, except it's driven in a completely different way," says Troy. Expect rustic, European-inspired fare

such as fried whitebait with chilli and fennel salt, pork hock croque monsieur, or gnocchi with rabbit and whipped ricotta.

### WHERE TO EAT

It's no surprise that the couple have a soft spot for Robert Molines, one of the true legends of the Hunter dining scene. Since departing his Pepper Tree restaurant (which still bears his name, but is now manned by George Francisco), the vivacious Frenchman opened [Bistro Molines](#) (749 Mt View Rd, Mt View; (02) 4990 9553). "His food is beautiful and you really do get a sense of the terroir, sitting up in the mountains overlooking the vineyards," says Troy. Bistro Molines is the perfect setting for a long, lingering lunch, but Troy warns that most don't need dinner afterwards. "There's a synergy to the whole experience that makes you relax, whether you like it or not," he says. "You get a charcuterie board put down in front of you loaded with house-made duck rillettes, pâté, terrines, chutneys, jams and pickles... and he's generous to say the least."

Another must for a long lunch is [The Olive Tree Restaurant](#) (Wyndham Estate, 700 Dalwood Rd, Dalwood; (02) 4938 1832), fronted by Andrew and Janet Wright. Set at the edge of the valley, [Wyndham Estate](#) is one of the Hunter's oldest wineries, and is regarded as the birthplace of Australian shiraz.

"Andrew and Janet really give you a big slice of the country at this historic location," says Megan. "It's no-fuss, rustic food that delivers big on flavour, and it's all presented on a fantastic range of foraged antique gems." The banquet-style dining showcases the best of the season, perhaps zucchini flowers, stuffed figs or big bowls of mussels. "It comes out like a relentless army until you roll out the door," says Troy. "For groups of eight or more, don't forget to ask about the

suckling pig with all the trimmings." For the full paddock-to-plate experience, head to [Margan](#) (1238 Milbrodale Rd, Broke; (02) 6579 1372) in the sleepy town of Broke. "Lisa and Andrew Margan's focus on the estate-grown, estate-made ethos furthers itself every year," says Megan. Most of the produce is sourced from the gardens surrounding the

"The Olive Tree Restaurant offers no-fuss rustic food that delivers big on flavour."

WORDS SARAH LEWIS PHOTOGRAPHY NIGEL LOUGH





1. The original wood cabin at Tinklers winery. 2. Rustic and welcoming Café Enzo in Pokolbin 3. Salted caramel and chocolate tart at Sabor in the Hunter dessert bar. 4. NSW's iconic Hunter Valley. **Opposite:** The Goldfish at Tempus Two winery in Pokolbin.

restaurant. “Their vegie patch is incredible – they’ve got one full-time gardener there, and they menu plan and discuss what’s coming up months in advance so they make sure the seasonal produce is ready,” says Troy. Chef Michael Robertson (ex-Becasse) is in his element here, crafting dishes such as garden vegetables with herb oil and buttermilk, or cured Hiramasa kingfish with pickled baby cucumbers and borage flowers. Stellar Margan wines complete the picture.

If you’re looking for a casual meal in the heart of the Hunter Valley, Megan and Troy tip [The Goldfish](#) at Tempus Two (cnr Broke and McDonalds rds, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7688). With grazing menu options and “hands down, the best pizzas in town,” says Troy. “They also have an outstanding Negroni and gin range, which is not a bad combination.”

For breakfast, it’s hard to go past the charm of [Cafe Enzo](#) (cnr Broke and Ekerts rds, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7233), home to a rustic sandstone restaurant. Troy’s go-to dish is the eggs benedict with smoked salmon. “It’s a great hangover cure with a couple of coffees,” he admits.

“When it’s time for a sugar hit, Sabor in the Hunter is a wildly popular dessert bar.”

When it’s time for a sugar hit, Megan hightails it to [Sabor in the Hunter](#) (319 Wilderness Rd, Lovedale; 1300 958 850). You’ll have to book ahead for this wildly popular dessert bar, which turns out indulgent cakes, kid-friendly sundaes and a slew of adults-only treats matched with local wines. “You can enjoy their desserts with coffee or a glass of wine on the patio, or choose from their vast selection of take-home treats, such as the Portuguese chocolate mousse,” says Megan.

#### CELLAR DOORS

Negotiating the 150-odd wineries in the Hunter Valley is no mean feat, so it’s best to come armed with insider knowledge. Kick-start your tasting trail at [Tyrrell’s Wines](#) (1838 Broke Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4993 7000), a “straight-up legend of the Hunter Valley,” according to Troy. The standout wines here are the late-release Vat 1

Semillon (“a real citrusy, minerally dancer”) and the Vat 47 Chardonnay (“light, tight and not over-oaked”). Arrive before 10.30am to join the daily winery tour, or arrange a private tasting in the historic cellar door.







1. The cellar door at boutique vineyard GunDog Estate. 2. Fire-side tastings at Keith Tulloch Wine. 3. Lake's Folly vineyard – home of a much-celebrated cabernet blend. 4. Winemaker Rod Windrim handpicking this season's vintage for organic winery, Krinklewood.



1 & 2. Canadian winemaker Jeff Byrne and the sun setting over his vineyard, Audrey Wilkinson. 3. Inside the bottling room at First Creek Wines.

Another winery that balances a palatable sense of history with modern sensibilities is **Tinklers** (Pokolbin Mountains Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7435). Third-generation winemaker Usher Tinkler works out of the original wooden cabin in Pokolbin, crafting an elegant single-vineyard range. “The wines are easy-drinking, but still interesting. They’re tight and acidic and there’s a lot to them,” says Troy. “I’m a big fan of his contemporary-style Poppy’s Chardonnay, and the School Block Semillon is also fantastic.”

One of the prettiest wineries in the region, **Krinklewood** (712 Wollombi Rd, Broke; (02) 6579 1322) is also one of the most progressive. In the vine-shrouded cellar door, sample Suzanne and Rod Windrim’s biodynamic drops, including a dry, Provencale-style rosé, medium-bodied shiraz, and the everyday-drinking Wild range. “Rod, Suzanne and the whole family are not only committed to the wines but every little part of this unique property,” says Megan. “It’s a stunning location, with chickens, peacocks, ducks, pigs, sheep and cattle – the whole place is just beautiful.”

To sample vintages from some of the region’s best boutique vigneron, stop by the centrally located **Small Winemakers**

**Centre** (426 McDonalds Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7668). Andrew Thomas, David Hook, Keith Tulloch and the Little Wine Company all tout their benchmark drops here. “It’s a great way to put the leading Hunter Valley semillons up against each other, then discuss them and choose which bottle you want to buy,” says Troy.

Shiraz may be the signature red of the Valley, but Rod Kempe at **Lake’s Folly** (2416 Broke Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7507) prefers to do things differently, producing a much-lauded cabernet blend that sells out from year to year. “Rod still defies what the Hunter Valley is about. He’s got some weird, sneaky soil over there that he’s not telling anyone else about,” says Troy. “Every bottle that you buy from Lakes Folly is a funny one, because you want to hold onto it but you also want to drink it straight away, and you know that if you wait, it’s just going to reward you even more.” The solution? Snap up two of these celebrated wines, but be sure to get in quick.

Naturally, Hungerford Hill and Keith Tulloch Wine also get the nod from Troy and Megan. At the landmark **Hungerford Hill** complex (2450 Broke Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7666), there’s a staggering range of wines from the Hunter and beyond, including an award-winning chardonnay out of Tumbarumba. For a memorable experience, there’s also a second area called the Epic Tasting Room. “If you want to take the tasting one step further, you can sit down and enjoy four or five little dishes from the Muse kitchen, matched to specific wines,” says Troy.

One of the most welcoming, relaxed tastings in the Hunter takes place at **Keith Tulloch Wine** (cnr Hermitage and Deasys rds, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7500). In the chic, Hamptons-style homestead, guests are shown to long tables, private lounge areas, cosy fireside nooks and the breezy balcony to taste their way through the estate’s wine flight. Troy says, “Instead of lining up like sheep or cattle, waiting to try your glass of wine, you can sit wherever you like and spend 20 or 30 minutes talking about the wines with your friends.” Linger over the crisp, dry semillon, two styles of chardonnay, pinot gris, shiraz and a cabernet blend before finishing with the Sauternes-inspired botrytis semillon.

Other wineries on Troy’s hit list include **First Creek Wines** (600 McDonalds Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 7293), for daily tours and “beautiful wines that are very approachable”. At **Audrey Wilkinson** (DeBeyers Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 1866), try drops from Canadian winemaker Jeff Byrne, “a big, strapping lad,

“One of the most welcoming, relaxed tastings takes place at Keith Tulloch Wine.”

#### WHERE TO SHOP

For fans of fromage, the **Smelly Cheese Shop** (Tempus Two, 2144 Broke Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 6713) is a must. “They’ve got a huge cheese room that you can sniff around in, with a great selection of local, Australian and imported cheeses,” says Troy. “At the moment I’m into Saint Agur blue and semi-firm Ossau Iraty, but I generally pick up something to melt over Morpeth sourdough when I get home from work.” This gourmet hub also dishes out antipasti, chutneys, olive oils, house-made gelato and breads, making it the perfect pit stop for picnic supplies or a light meal back at your accommodation.

For Hunter-made cheese, pay a visit to **Binnorie Dairy** (1 Mistletoe Ln, Pokolbin; (02) 4998 6660). Simon Gough has set up shop in the Tuscany Wine Estate, handcrafting fresh goat’s and cow’s milk cheeses using locally sourced milk. “We’re very lucky to have a cheesemaker like Simon in the Hunter Valley,” says Troy. “My favourite is the chevre goat’s cheese. It’s a pretty

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1. Thistle Hill guesthouse. 2. Fresh eggs at Tinklers 3. Binnorie Dairy's cheesemaker Simon Gough. 4. Suite at Crowne Plaza Hunter Valley.



simple cheese but it's very versatile, and it lends itself to a lot of applications, from salads and tarts to meaty braised dishes and desserts. We use it all over our menus."

Round out your shopping list at **Lovedale Smokehouse Gourmet Pantry** (64 Majors Ln, Lovedale; (02) 4930 7832), where you can taste, then take home, an impressive array of charcuterie and produce smoked on site. Take your pick from salmon pastrami or dill-flecked gravlax, smoked rainbow trout, sausages, salami, prosciutto and more. There's also a relaxed restaurant and cafe onsite, plus cooking classes led by chef/owner Ben Sales.

For freshly picked fruits and vegetables, call into **Tinklers** (see Cellar Doors), suggests Megan, "and check out what's in season. They have the best figs, plums, peaches, melons, pumpkins, table grapes, avocados and citrus in town."

"Take your pick of salmon pastrami or dill-flecked gravlax at Lovedale Smokehouse."

## WHERE TO STAY

There's a range of luxury hotels and charming B&Bs throughout the Hunter. **Chateau Elan** (Vintage Dr, Rothbury; (02) 4998 2500) is a five-star resort set among the Greg Norman-designed 'The Vintage' golf course. Choose from stylish Spa Suites

with zero-gravity beds and Nespresso coffee machines, or family-friendly villas with kitchen, lounge and dining areas. Take advantage of the pampering day spa and world-class golf course on site. From \$230 per double per night.

Set on 25 acres, **Thistle Hill** (591 Hermitage Rd, Pokolbin; (02) 6574 7217) promises a tranquil country getaway. The rustic-chic guesthouse offers six guest rooms, while the

self-contained Lavender Cottage sleeps five and boasts a barbecue and alfresco dining. From \$210 per double per night.

The centrally located **Crowne Plaza Hunter Valley** (430 Wine Country Dr, Lovedale; (02) 4991 0900) is ideal for groups and families. The sprawling resort offers a golf course, pool, restaurants and bars, plus contemporary rooms, suites and villas to suit any budget. As a bonus, courtesy shuttles can be arranged for winery visits during the day and restaurant transfers at night. From

\$229 per double per night. **d.**

*Thanks to Destination NSW for their assistance. For more information on the region and on Hunter Valley Wine & Food Month (throughout June), visit: visitnsw.com.*