



## The nest in the hills

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED IN MUDGEE, WHERE ROB GEDDES DISCOVERED IT'S MORE 'CHIC' THAN 'COUNTRY HICK'.

Words **Rob Geddes**

Mudgee should be pronounced 'Moo-jay' with a French inflection, and known as 'the Woollahra of the west' not just another country town. Mudgee has a sense of style; leafy eastern suburbs vistas, Sydney sandstone-style grand houses, wide boulevards and a thriving café culture gilded into a town with a rich wine infused, gold rush driven history.

Being a solid three hour drive west over the Great Dividing Range, Mudgee is free from Sydney day trippers and as a result has developed a less glossy, more gritty depth and diversity of events and activities for an Australian wine region. Travel time means most people take a long weekend, leaving Friday morning to avoid the ruck and maul of the public holiday long weekends.

The area is framed by the Great Dividing Range's rolling hills and is set between a richly productive web of unblemished rivers that provided the first Australians with a good living and the meaning of the name, literally translated as 'nest in the hills'. Mudgee is a town with a heart, it has presence thanks to the lovely location and the Robert Hoddle town plan, before he moved onto laying out Melbourne in the

familiar grid pattern with its lovely wide roads, tidy cool laneways overlaid with gold rush enriched buildings.

The town's gold rush 'rags to riches' background keeps being reincarnated. Henry Lawson fed on its lean gruel in the aftermath of the 1860s gold rushes and *The Nugget*, a study in mateship where three road workers discover the world's biggest nugget, was filmed here in 1992. This was made especially evocative by Eric Bana. Apparently he studied for his role by spending time with the local road gang to capture the relaxed, knock-about characters that can still be found in abundance sipping lattes in cafés decorated with the work of local artists.

Mudgee means many different things yet all are overlaid with a deep sense of local pride. Locals have a certain wit, sharp and quick, watchful and wise. It's a diverse place, proudly parochial and hard edged, yet with a lot of interaction and self support.

The joy of Mudgee stems from locals who have moved with the times and lies in its versatility; wine and food with arts, culture, history and nature.

The climate helps; there are four distinct seasons made relevant by the annual cycle of local winemakers.



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Mudgee does breakfast like few country towns in Australia, with eight restaurants and cafés centred around Market Street, including the famous Eltons or the old world, secluded and romantic courtyard of Kahve. The Butcher Shop Cafés in both Mudgee and Gulgong have great coffee in stylish surrounds and filling food to set you up for the day's adventures.

A number of wineries do weekend lunches including Di Lusso, Burnbrae (once a month), High Valley and Blue Wren, so it's easy to go with the flow and wander from winery to winery until you're hungry.

Mudgee also boasts what seems to be Australia's longest running wine bar, Roth's. Bob Roth first started dispensing wines, with curious names like 1080 named after a poison, in 1923 (12 years before J.C. Watson opened Jimmy Watsons in Melbourne) to interested locals visiting his general store.

Legend has it that the local churches, not happy with a wine bar in town, protested and as a compromise to closing, the bottom half of the windows were painted black so passers by could not see how much fun the inhabitants were having.



Opposite page: Mudgee vineyards 'nestled in the hills'.  
Left to right: The Mudgee Brewing Company; the 'stylish surrounds' of the Butcher Shop Café; the historic Mudgee station.

There are lots of great restaurants for dinner including Sajos Restaurant and Bar and the Mudgee Brewery, or opposite at the Lawson Park Hotel where you can barbecue your own steak. But only a local would know to go to Deeb's Kitchen. Open during the week by appointment and regularly on Saturday nights, it offers fantastic meze style food and their eggplant in syrup with cloves makes an exotic finish.

The past is never far away in wine towns. With each vintage history is re-made in exciting new ways, meaning there is always something interesting to drink. Mudgee has a long wine history and it has been at the forefront of wine fashion since the start thanks to some ancient vigneron selecting Chardonnay for local production. The vines found here have been central to establishing the quality of Australian Chardonnay.

In spite of a past where the corporate wine companies have thundered in (and out), Mudgee is really about mature small wineries with personality and old vines.



There was a long gap between the gold rush plantings which saw only a hat-full of wine made by the old German families and the new plantings of the 1970s spurred on in part by the quality of the local Chardonnay. The relatively high altitude (550 metres) means the district holds acidity in Chardonnay, producing wines with a tighter structure and with more apple and lemon flavours than the Hunter, such as at Montrose.

Today you can add strengths in Rosé, Riesling, Semillon, Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese and Barbera to the must-taste Mudgee experience.



Bottom: Oatley's winemaker James Manners. Left: wine in waiting in Robert Stein's cellar. Above: Thistle Hill vineyard. Right: Jane Lowe leading one of her farm walks.

Full-bodied Mudgee reds carry a lot of tannin. Shiraz such as Huntington can have solid colour, blackberry fruit sweetness and concentration with intense, dense, chewy, sandy to silty tannin texture and tannic power. The Lowe example is elegant and medium bodied and Montrose Black Shiraz is more French oak driven.

Mudgee Cabernet primarily has blackcurrant characters, such as Huntington's, and Thistle Hill's is earthier with mint and eucalypt varietal as part of the background. The regional tannin structure gives substance and allows wines to age well.

You can find both classic and contemporary in Mudgee and now it's the home of Australia's most successful wine company headed by Robert Oatley of Rosemount fame. Their centre at Craigmoor offers a taste of the traditions of Mudgee and the contemporary under the Robert Oatley label. The Paspaley family of Broome are here too, having launched their Bunnamagoo winery, the first new winery in recent times.

"Mudgee is really a combination of high altitude and the soil types here which gives us a lot of options viticulturally," says Oatley's winemaker James Manners. "We do Chardonnay and Shiraz really well and there are some great Cabernets

in the area. We have a long history with the Italian varieties and some producers are doing good Riesling, so it makes it very hard to choose a regional hero."

Overall, Mudgee produces NSW's biggest-bodied wines. The regional red wines all have sweet fruit and appealing fleshy, full-bodied structure. The new wave, such as Logan, Erudgere, Oatley and Steins, is showing brightness with some traditional long-established styles by Huntington, Miramar and Burnbrae showing more polish to their firm, full-bodied tannins. Cellar lovers of big, long-lived reds will find plenty of interest here.

Mudgee is one of Australia's first regions with a strong organic wine growing movement, thanks to pioneering Botobolar. There is an unbroken line of endeavour including the recently merged Thistle Hill and Eurdgere, as well as work by David Lowe. According to Erik Denison from Thistle Hill, Mudgee is the ideal region for making organic wine due to its climate. "We have the oldest organic vineyards in Australia and we don't have a lot of the same disease problems as other regions," he says. "So we don't have to use fungicides. When you combine those conditions with a professionally trained winemaker you have a real recipe for success."

It seems to be working already, with Thistle Hill winning the Best Organic Wine and the Best Organic White Wine at the Australia/New Zealand Organic Wine Show as well as Best Organic Wine in NSW at the NSW Wine Awards.

One of the local leaders is the Lowe family and Jane Lowe's walking farm tour is certainly the most entertaining way to increase your understanding of the future of viticulture and appreciation of compost and soil health. The quality of Lowe family Zinfandel is a remarkable testament to their thinking.

Tours are held at 11am on the third Saturday of each month, coinciding with the regional markets and include a lamb roll and a glass of wine at the finish.

Jane Lowe's remarkably practical demonstration of the powerful new ideas in Australian agriculture including 'farming without farming' make the farm walk at Lowe Family Wines a must-see for anyone who has ever wondered about the fundamental connection between wine and the land.

Ormiston free range pork is another tour worth taking. Local newcomers James (a vet) and Georgie (an animal behaviourist) bring a unique spirit to their knowledge of animal needs with their extended pig family stay at Lowe Family Wines and enjoy, amongst other delights, the whey from the local cheese producers and lees from the Mudgee Brewery, surely some of the most pampered pigs in Australia. Ormiston's farm tours are a must as they walk you through their philosophy and practise of sustainable agriculture.

If the 'brr' of boyhood motorcycles is still in your ear, you can mix this with some of the region's best wines at a visit to Robert Steins. The wines are cutting edge Mudgee and the Motorcycle museum gives a chance for nostalgic thoughts of the open road.



Port barrel \$399

## Get barrelled at Bendigo Coopers

In addition to traditional oak casks, Bendigo Coopers sell a range of Australian hand-crafted cellar door products. The range includes spittoons, ice buckets, cheese boards, fortified casks and much more.



Ice-bucket \$140

The success of the Cellar Door products led to the creation of an exciting homewares range, launched in 2007. All the products are produced in Australia and are crafted from either recycled or Tasmanian oak.



Cheeseboard \$135

For more information please email [graham@bendigocoopers.com.au](mailto:graham@bendigocoopers.com.au) or call 03 5449 3581.





Left to right: Yummy treats at Ormiston Farmers Pantry; the Henry Lawson Centre; a relaxing Mudgee vista.



Art is everywhere during September in Mudgee, adding a quirky, colourful beat to the town.

Twenty minutes from Mudgee is Gulgong, the town that was on the \$10 note with its 'freeze frame' of a gold rush town's main street. It's home to the remarkable Cudgegong Gallery, one of the best regional galleries in Australia where you will find a modern sensitivity to representation. Walking into this gallery will shift you from the rural to the world of international good taste. Fairview ArtSpace is on the Northern side of Mudgee. Ask here about directions to the early Brett Whitely painting located at 'the drip'.

Art is everywhere during September in Mudgee, adding a quirky, colourful beat to the town. The winemakers' habit of industry and artistic sense fills

local wineries with vibrant exhibitions, enabling all visitors' senses to be engaged through food, the arts and wine.

The wineries host exhibitions, boosted by a show of local co-operation with each café and many stores celebrating both the local wines and their resident artists in their windows. As you move from winery to winery you can be assured of diverse and entertaining artistic experiences.

You will also find art in the most unexpected places such as the weirdly evocative sculptures of Nigel White adding drama and design to the drive into Botobolar winery.

That's Mudgee in a nutshell, the unexpected lies with the tasteful, amid rolling hills in a piece of paradise, inhabited by people both stylish and a little bit quirky.

*Rob Geddes stayed as a guest of River Lane B&B, for more details visit [riverlanebandb.com.au](http://riverlanebandb.com.au) ■*

## + Info

+ For more details, call Mudgee Visitor Information Centre on 02 6372 1020 or see [visitmudgeeregion.com.au](http://visitmudgeeregion.com.au)

### + September in Mudgee

The Mudgee Wine Festival including 'Go Grazing', is the culinary event of the year in Mudgee with 14 cellar doors offering food to match their wines.

Tickets \$55. Call 1800 816 304 or go to [visitmudgeeregion.com.au](http://visitmudgeeregion.com.au) for details.

## WIN!

Thistle Hill want you to know how great organic wine can taste, so they have three triple packs of their award-winning drops to give away.



Each pack is worth \$70 and contains Thistle Hill's organic 2005 Pinot Noir, 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon and 2009 Riesling. To enter tell us in 50 words or less your thoughts on organic wine. Send entries to Locked Bag 229, Hunter Region MC NSW 2310 or [editor@wineselectors.com.au](mailto:editor@wineselectors.com.au) by May 1, 2010.