

RIVER OF PLENTY

By: *Victoria Laurie*

THE CULINARY SAFARI TEST

Victoria Laurie joins a bus full of food lovers on a tour of Western Australia's southwest

WORD is out that Maeve O'Meara, co-author of SBS's Food Lovers' Guide to Australia, is touring **Margaret River** with 25 foodies in a luxury coach. So as we motor down leafy back roads on our way to yet another winery and more culinary treats, a mobile phone rings. "Anyone on your gourmet safari ever eaten dog?" asks the caller.

Sitting at the back of the bus, a giggling O'Meara answers in the negative; up the front, Perth chef Don Hancey, whom O'Meara has invited to act as our local guide, finds himself telling a local radio host how he once ate dog meat in Vietnam. The announcer explains that the topic had been prompted by Princess Mary of Denmark's father-in-law, who has just confessed publicly to a penchant for eating Fido.

This sets off a discussion in the bus about whether eating Bambi is as sacrilegious. The previous night, O'Meara's convivial band of clients, most of whom have flown over from Sydney and Melbourne, tucked into succulent pink medallions of venison from **Margaret River**'s only deer farm. Almost on cue, a herd of deer comes into view as our coach turns a corner. We rationalise that, before ending up on a dinner plate, Bambi at least got to frolic in the **Margaret River** region's rich green pastures, amid stands of elegant peppermint trees and sprouting, black grass trees.

Safari is hardly the word to describe O'Meara's five-day eat-fest through the southwest. Exploring the region's culinary outposts from a base camp at five-star Bunker Bay resort bears no resemblance to an African safari, unless having to turn on your bath taps unaided is your idea of roughing it. But the thrill of discovery is everywhere, even for this Perth-based interloper who joins the tour midweek after driving south for three hours.

O'Meara's hunch that **Margaret River** has as many food delights as her other Australian Gourmet Safari routes (in NSW's Hunter Valley and Mudgee wine regions, and Kangaroo Island off the coast of South Australia) is spot-on. This is her first trip here, although she has cooked with **Margaret River** produce for years. "It's as if I've had this delicious entree before I've even come and sat down for the main course," she says, while admitting to slight jitters over the novelty of knowing as little as her clients about the region. "It's probably more magical in reality than I'd imagined -- nothing quite prepares you for the white beaches and aqua-coloured water, seeing dolphins playing and being in this wonderful fresh air."

O'Meara and Hancey are friends who met through Tasting Australia, the Adelaide food event where they have been judges of regional produce. Hancey knows **Margaret River** like the back of his hand: the Perth-born chef has worked at all the region's best wineries, and is on first-name terms with nearly every food producer within a wide radius.

What the pair has put together is the five-day equivalent of a progressive dinner, although it is never too much. "There is a point where you can have too much food and wine," O'Meara says firmly, "and we've chosen wineries that Don has an affinity with or ones that people from the east might know." The approach is civilised and unhurried. At the forest-fringed Leeuwin Estate, host Tricia Horgan joins us as we eat a superbly delicate entree of marron, or West Australian yabby, with a glass of Leeuwin's famous rich, buttery chardonnay. Then everyone clambers back on the coach to Voyager Estate, where spatchcock with roast pumpkin and sticky onion jam is served with an as yet unreleased Voyager Estate wine.

As the coach turns into the entrance of each renowned place -- Cape Mentelle, Wise Wine, Cullen, Vasse Felix -- Hancey takes the microphone and tells us each winery's origins and specialty. He is greeted with handshakes and bearhugs by our hosts, whom he then prompts into sharing candid insights.

O'Meara's travelling companions are an eclectic mix comprising women, married couples, a fishing writer and his sister, a mother-and-daughter team on a birthday treat and the odd foreigner. Warm, witty and clearly interested in her fellow travellers, O'Meara is a good host and everyone's shared interest seems to guarantee good behaviour.

What strikes me is that these are unsnobby food lovers; they give a round of applause to the chef in Voyager's elegant dining room, but are equally content dodging the salt spray as we cruise down the Blackwood River, near Augusta, tearing cooked western rock lobster limb from limb when the plastic forks run out.

Equal pleasure is in knowing that the lobster has been pulled from the icy green waters of the Indian Ocean a few hours earlier. We're told this by our host, boat captain Jan Hughes, who knows Hancey from his award-winning days as the chef of Augusta's only restaurant. Hughes explains that her husband and son, who have two boat licences, pulled in a record 55 tonnes of crustaceans last year, with a price of more than \$30 a lobster. It probably slots the Hughes family in the millionaire bracket, but it hasn't altered their down-to-earth generosity.

Hughes brings out a big bowl of mexican salad, a lurid-looking but tasty concoction straight from a Country Women's Association cookbook. Onion, corn and mexican beans are mixed together, layered with light cream cheese and topped with crushed corn chips.

O'Meara looks startled by this culinary masterpiece, but relaxes when everyone eagerly tucks in. As the boat cruises along, we learn the curious nicknames for southwest places: Colourpatch, Deadfinish and Scallywag. A pair of unruffled sea eagles watch us against the backdrop of a thousand gliding black swans.

The following day, we confront more local wildlife, this time on our plates. At Caves House, a magnificently restored art deco resort in the coastal hamlet of Yallingup, chef Danny Angove pulls from the oven a tray full of pork backstraps with their golden fatty covering. The meat comes from free-range pigs bred by David Hohnen, who crossbreeds wild sows with domesticated animals. The pigs are allowed to snuffle around freely under trees and in the vineyards.

Angove loves the way **Margaret River** inspires novel ideas. "It's not just the scenery, the food, the wine. It's little people doing little things, like the pork tonight," he says. "There's still a hobby farm feel here and I hear about new things all the time, like **Margaret River** free-range eggs trying to go totally organic. In the olive oil industry, people grow in their own back yards and press for themselves, so you don't have to buy off one company any more."

The choice of local ingredients is astonishing, he adds. "Asparagus down here is incredible. Everyone's using venison at the moment, so we stay away from that. But we use fish, squid, abalone, all from the west coast, nothing imported. Albany rock oysters are great, Pemberton marron is good." So are the shiny black marron that the Gourmet Safari mob are invited to pull out of the dam at Leeuwin Estate. These are served in halves with the lightest of salads dressed with crispy prosciutto, creamy goat's cheese and local verjuice from the Berry Farm (another destination with a pioneering approach to new vinegar types).

Vasse Felix, the winery owned by Janet Holmes a Court's family company, serves up baby goat loin in a rich stew of chick peas, dates and labne (yoghurt cheese), complemented by a 2003 Vasse Felix cabernet merlot.

The most taxing task on this trip is to stagger one's eating -- and stagger on and off the bus. For the most practised gourmards, the day starts filling plates with Bunker Bay's excellent muesli (five stars from O'Meara), jams, poached fruits, soft omelets and baked breads. Or you can just sit with a percolated coffee on the veranda and admire Bunker Bay's slick architecture. The hotel is made of local stone with in-vogue coffee brown inner walls and wide windows framing blissful views of the water. If you like the resort's individual villas, you can buy one (and lease it back to the resort) for a mere \$300,000.

Food and luxury are not the only highlights on this excursion; the coach trundles through cathedrals of honey-barked karri giants in the Boranup forest, past the white sands of Hamelin Bay and on to Augusta's end-of-the-earth lighthouse.

This is the south-westernmost tip of our continent, where Southern Ocean meets Indian Ocean. The sea where the two meet is treacherous; a cairn marks the place where, in 1945, the N-class destroyer HMAS Nizam narrowly avoided the rocks below the lighthouse, only to be hit by a freak wave that swept 10 naval ratings overboard. It's a sobering thought as we tuck into fresh scones and cream, served in the sunlit Augusta lighthouse tearooms. Homemade jams are provided by the local CWA ladies of Augusta (apple and rhubarb is my favourite).

“You really get a sense of the place by being with its people, whether it's even finding the local CWA shop and those great green tomato pickles that you'll never quite find anywhere else,” O'Meara says. She says the next **Margaret River** tour in November may include a visit to a chef's family kitchen, and a spring walk among Western Australia's legendary bush wild flowers. “There's a generosity of spirit here that works well for the place,” O'Meara observes quietly, as the bus occupants snooze. “It's not ‘Look at me’, it's ‘Look at us.’”

Victoria Laurie was a guest of Gourmet Safaris.

Checklist

Margaret River Gourmet Safaris run each May and November.

The four-night tour has five-star accommodation at Bunker Bay Quay West Resort and one night in Perth. Tours cost \$2295 a person, twin share, inclusive of most meals and wine, tastings, guide and coach transport.

More: (02) 9960 5675; www.gourmetsafaris.com.au.
