

TASMANIA

From mushrooms to oysters and even wallaby,
enjoy a taste of the ever-appetising Apple Isle.

Words Brendan McCallum

ON A PLATE





Clockwise from left: Anna Terry hard at work with Doug, Poppy and Peggy; grading a fresh black truffle; lead truffle-hunter Doug at play.



Blessed by a pristine natural environment and home to a staggering diversity of flora and fauna, Tasmania has truly come into its own over the last decade as a destination of note for lovers of fresh produce. One need only look at how many chefs have called quits on mainland cities over recent years and started afresh in Hobart, to see just how desirable Tasmania has become for its carefree lifestyle and its abundant natural beauty.

Its legacy as a first-rate site of food production however extends right back to the earliest days of European settlement. Indeed, Tasmania's 'Apple Isle' sobriquet can be traced right back to the colony's early history as an apple grower and exporter, with the first apple tree planted on the island in 1788 by none other than William Bligh, of the infamous HMS Bounty. Before settlement, the Indigenous population of this small island at the bottom of the world enjoyed a diverse diet of everything from native currants and plums to river mint, kangaroo and shellfish.

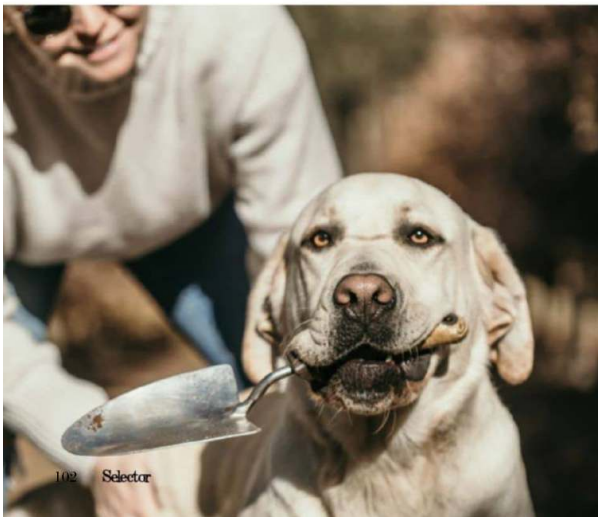
Dairy farming was crucial to the success of Tasmania as a free settlement. From just a handful of cows, by the 1850s the state had become entirely self-sufficient in regards to food production, and was in fact exporting both butter and cheese to the mainland. Even today Tasmanian cheeses are regarded as some of the country's best. Suffice to say, if there is a gourmet bone in your body, Tasmania is a must-visit destination for anyone seeking to experience the finest and freshest in food.

BLACK GOLD

About 50km west of Launceston, in the central north of Tasmania, lies Deloraine, an artsy, bucolic town straddling the Meander River. Surrounded by some of the state's most productive farmland, it was in the picturesque foothills of the Great Western Tiers that Australia's first black truffle was harvested by farmer Tim Terry in 1999, after years of planning, experimentation and cultivation.

Today, Tasmanian Truffles is the country's premium producer of this most sought-after ingredient – the pungent, textured fungi that commands top dollar around the world, with Tim's children Anna and Henry continuing his work. On any given day, Anna can be found harvesting amongst the tree-lines, accompanied by her three dogs, Doug, Poppy, and Peggy.

"The season has been good so far," says Anna. "We've had a relatively dry winter with some nice sunny days, so harvesting has certainly been a lot more pleasant than last year." Between May and September, visitors to Tasmanian Truffles are invited to "Join the Hunt", tagging along with Anna and her canine truffle hunters to dig up these black gems from the farm's rich soils. Afterwards, you'll experience what all the fuss is about with a fresh truffle pizza and tasting by the fire – plus, of course, a good scratch behind the ear for the heroes of the day, the dogs.



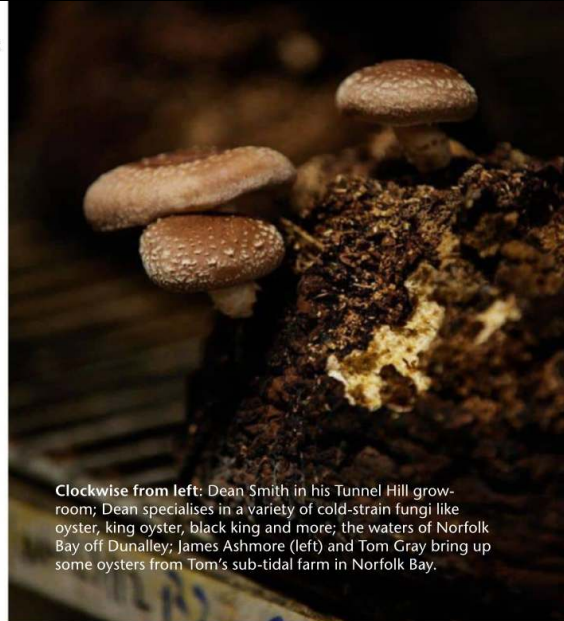


UNDERGROUND CHARM

As it turns out, Tasmania is a genuine hotspot of fungal diversity, a mycological garden of Eden. Not far east of Hobart, below the slopes of Mount Rummy, lies Tunnel Hill Mushrooms. In 2000, Dean Smith and family bought the house and land that Tunnel Hill Mushrooms occupies, which came with an unusual feature – a disused 19th century railway tunnel in a gully below the house.

For years Dean just used the tunnel as storage space. Some years later, he was approached by the former farm manager at Huon Valley Mushrooms, who advised him the site was likely well-suited to cultivating mushrooms. Dean began to learn all he could about growing mushrooms, to discover that this serendipitous visitor was correct – the tunnel’s naturally low-light, high humidity and consistent temperatures proved perfectly suited to the task.

“I tend to grow cold strain varieties – white and blue oyster, king oyster, black king, shitake, lions mane,” says Dean. “From time to time I’ll play around with other like flame cap and coral tooth.” Today, Dean supplies his gourmet mushrooms to some of the top restaurants in Hobart, and will often take curious visitors through for a tour. He’s hoping to entice a like-minded business into sharing the tunnel with him. “A wine bar or something similar would be perfect.”



Clockwise from left: Dean Smith in his Tunnel Hill grow-room; Dean specialises in a variety of cold-strain fungi like oyster, king oyster, black king and more; the waters of Norfolk Bay off Dunalley; James Ashmore (left) and Tom Gray bring up some oysters from Tom’s sub-tidal farm in Norfolk Bay.

WATERS OF LIFE

The waters surrounding Tasmania offer up abundant delicacies also. James Ashmore, of Ashmore’s Southern Fish Markets, talks up some of the island’s signature seafood fare. “Winter short spine urchin roe is without a doubt the best flavour ride your mouth will ever have, fresh out of the shell,” he says, while also noting the quality of Tassie lobster, abalone, fresh fish – blue eye, flathead, stripey trumpeter – and oysters.

Speaking of oysters, James refers to the unique farming practices of one of his suppliers, Fulham Aquaculture, who he’s partnered with since 2003. Overseen by Tom Gray, Fulham operates out of the fishing village of Dunalley in Norfolk Bay. “Fulham boasts traditional post and rail intertidal plus an offshore, sub-tidal deep water farm,” says James. “Tom manipulates his entire farm to suit the oyster and the growing conditions. As a result, the flavour of Fulham oysters is also unique, with a sweet aftertaste.”

Sadly, however, Tasmania’s delicate marine eco-system is in a precarious position. “As an active commercial diver for many years, I’ve seen a rapid and devastating decline in macro algae around the coastline, as well as the invasive spread of introduced pests,” says James. “Pacific sea star, long spined sea urchins, undaria.” Influxes like these present a pernicious issue that demands creative solutions.



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Above: Peacock and Jones's culinary curator Ben Milbourne, head chef Julian Volkmer, and restaurant manager Joshua Coad.

Top right: Dean Smith's Tunnel Hill Mushrooms feature in this succulent wagyu beef dish.



THE TASTE OF PRIDE OF PLACE

One approach to these threats, according to Tasmanian-born culinary identity, food writer and TV personality Ben Milbourne, is to “eat the problem.” As culinary curator of Peacock and Jones, one of two in-house restaurants in The Henry Jones Art Hotel on Hobart’s waterfront, Ben has incorporated these prickly interlopers into its seasonal menu – along with Bruny Island wallaby, which has become so numerous that their populations are degrading the natural landscape of the island.

“According to the hunters I’ve been out with, they’re shooting 1,000 wallabies a week with no real dent in the population. It’s a matter of sustainability.”

Housed within the former IXL Jam Factory, The Henry Jones Art Hotel’s structural beams still retain traces of the jam sugars that were once produced in such significant quantities by generations of Tasmania families that worked there – literally exuding a sense of place. And, just as the hotel shines a light on local talent through its curated collection of works by Tasmanian artists, so too does Peacock and Jones celebrate Tasmanian producers and provenance in every aspect.

Certainly, the wallaby tartare that Ben and Head Chef Julian Volkmer plate up at Peacock and Jones – alongside the aforementioned sea urchin, served with local fennel and radish – shows a lateral approach to solving the problems caused by invasive or rampant species.

Further, their emphasis on absolute locality shows off these local ingredients at peak freshness – with Dean’s mushrooms, Anna’s truffles and Tom’s oysters all featuring on the menu – celebrating the fruits of Tasmania’s abundance, while eliminating food miles as much as is practical.

It all adds up to something delicious, expressing provenance as purely as possible, in such a way as to put the Apple Isle right on the tip of your tongue – and right at the top of every foodie’s bucket list. **S**