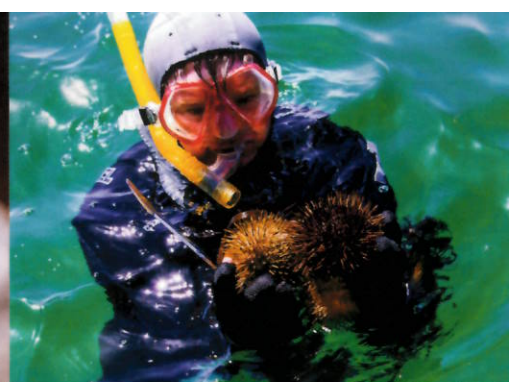


Taste of Tasmania

Long known for its world-class seafood, the island state is increasingly taking centre stage when it comes to showcasing Australia's best artisanal food & drink including everything from truffles to whisky, to leatherwood honey ice cream.

WORDS BY GILL CANNING



Clockwise, from far left: A Truffle Farm picnic; Fruits of the hunt; Whisky tasting at Belgrove Distillery; Diving for sea urchins; Tunnel Hill Mushrooms; The Henry Jones Art Hotel; Oysters at Peacock and Jones.



PHOTOGRAPHY: THE HENRY JONES ART HOTEL; TOURISM AUSTRALIA; SAMUEL SHELLEY; POON WAI NANG.

Crunching our way across blankets of autumn leaves, our eyes scan the ground for fungi. A light snowfall begins, dusting our shoulders silvery-white. The blue sky above belies the brisk wind and the temperature hovering above zero. After arriving in Hobart yesterday, we have travelled halfway up the state to The Truffle Farm at Deloraine, the home of Australia's first black truffle.

Anna Terry, owner-operator of Tasmanian Truffles along with her brother Henry, gives us a warm welcome. She is shadowed by her trio of truffle-hunting dogs – Douglas, Poppy, and new recruit, Peggy. Anna has been training dogs for the past 13 years – now considered superior to pigs for truffle hunting as they are less inclined to eat the booty.

"The most important thing [about truffle hunting] is the love between the dogs and me. We have a very strong bond," she says, giving Doug's soft ears a scratch.

These days, increasing numbers of consumers want to know where and how the food adorning our plates and the wine filling our glasses originates. With a growing focus on organic, sustainable farming and agriculture, the food and drinks industry is welcoming that scrutiny. Tasmania is

SWEET AS

While in Hobart, I taste some of the best ice cream I've ever had at Van Diemen's Land Creamery – fresh Tasmanian ingredients, including local milk, lavender, leatherwood honey (unique to Tasmania), olive oil and whisky play starring roles. I can recommend the Lavender & White Chocolate and the Pepperberry & Leatherwood Honey (yes, I went back a second time). Hobart also has more than its fair share of fine bakeries. For some of the best sourdough, and sweet treats, check out Daci & Daci Bakers, Pigeon Whole Bakers and Jackman & McCross.

increasingly famous for its fine dining and I'm on a mission to meet some of those producers and growers who create the delicious produce feeding the fine folk of Tasmania and beyond.

Ben Milbourne, Culinary Curator at Hobart's Peacock and Jones restaurant within the Henry Jones Art Hotel, is passionate about fresh, locally sourced food. The former *MasterChef* finalist left his job as a science teacher for a career in food. Four years later, he is running his own production company and writing cookbooks when not curating the finest local produce for Peacock and Jones.

PASSIONATE PRODUCERS

"In a state like Tasmania, produce and producers are king," he says. "Small producers using the best agricultural practices are the key groups supplying the good restaurants and cafés and that produce is being delivered daily – often by the producers themselves. The only way you are going to get access to this amazingly cared-for produce is by visiting one of these insanely good Hobart eateries like Peacock and Jones."

Back on the truffle farm, our four-legged pros, Poppy and Doug, help us dig up a truffle or three, which we throw in the communal basket after inhaling their earthy, nutty smell. With

a full basket, we head into the shed for some slices of fresh-from-the-oven cheese and truffle pizza with truffle balsamic, a glass of local white or red and an antipasto platter of goodies. Our haul will later be turned into truffle honey, truffle oil, truffle salt or truffle mustard.

After lunch, sixth-generation farmer Peter Bignell is our host at Belgrove Distillery, where he produces a rye whisky second to none. Originally a sheep and strawberry powered still to turn the rye into his own bespoke whisky brand. He believes he has the only bio-diesel powered still in the world (used cooking oil from the roadhouse next to his farm does the job). The spent mash from the distillation is in turn fed to Peter's sheep, completing the symbiotic relationship. His wholly sustainable operation caught the eye of Gordon Ramsay in 2020, when the chef filmed an episode of his TV series, *Gordon Ramsay Uncharted* at Belgrove. "I had Gordon shovelling dried sheep dung, which we burnt to smoke a special batch of whisky – Wholly Shit Rye Whisky," says Peter.

"A RICH VANILLA ICE CREAM SPLASHED WITH BLACK RYE COFFEE LIQUEUR IS THE PERFECT FINALE."

By the time we've taste several of Peter's beverages, I'm feeling glad none of us is driving back to our hotel. For me, the standout is his Black Rye coffee liqueur. "It's great for making espresso martinis," Peter confides.

LOCAL IS KING

Dinner later that night in our hotel – the elegant Henry Jones Art Hotel on Hobart's waterfront – is at the Landscape Restaurant & Grill, the hotel's signature restaurant. Local produce takes centre stage, including Norfolk Bay oysters, Cape Grim grass-fed, GMO-free beef and the most delicious hand-cut duck fat chips (it's no surprise to learn that the potato industry is one of Tasmania's most valuable agricultural money-earners).

THE HENRY JONES ART HOTEL

Located within the oldest waterfront warehouses in Hobart, the Henry Jones Art Hotel is Australia's first dedicated 'art hotel'. The site's European history dates back to 1804 and takes its name from its famous past as the location of one of Australia's most successful companies – Henry Jones IXL Jams. When the jam factory shut down in 1979, the property languished until 2004 when it was transformed into a world-class hotel. Each room and public space within this stylish sandstone hotel features artworks by Tasmanian artists that are for sale. thehenryjones.com

For dessert, a rich vanilla ice cream splashed with Belgrove's Black Rye coffee liqueur is the perfect finale.

Early next morning, we're off to visit an oyster farm – a first for me. Oysters are great for the environment, filtering out tons of phytoplankton from the water each year. And the local variety is never treated with any chemicals – so all you get is what nature provides.

Kitted out in bulky yellow life jackets, we hop aboard the oyster barge at Dunalley and are whisked across picturesque Norfolk Bay at an alarmingly fast clip. "Hold on tight!" warns Fulham Aquaculture's Tom Gray, who is at the helm. He needn't have worried. As the barge has no sides, we grasp anything we can find in order to avoid sliding off into those choppy Tasmanian waters. Having slowed down to a stop to inspect the crop, we speed back to land where freshly shucked oysters and a glass of Tasmanian Arras Brut Elite sparkling wine is our reward.


Continuing our gourmet journey that afternoon, we drop in on Dean Smith, who for the past 12 years has been growing mushrooms in a 130-year-old railway tunnel at the bottom of his garden. The 90m-long tunnel – formerly used to store military weapons and gold after the railway route was discontinued in 1926 – has proved an ideal place for his venture. Twelve metres below ground, he cultivates thousands of king oyster, shiitake and lion's mane mushrooms. After a fascinating tour of the operation, we are treated to some king oysters picked straight from Dean's tunnel, fried in butter to perfection. Eaten in the crisp Tasmanian air, their flavour and freshness is unbeatable.

Our last foodie foray is back on the water with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys. Along with Ben, Peacock and Jones Head Chef Julian Volkmer and skipper Tomas Thiele, we hop aboard the *Minke* for a sea urchin hunt. After cruising to the northern end of Bruny island, Ben and Tom don wetsuits and hop in the freezing Derwent.

Soon afterwards, they are back with a bag of fresh sea urchins, which the more brave among us sample. Ben explains, "We have an overabundance of sea urchins in Tasmania. Asia is a huge export market but urchins are killing the crayfish so we are eating the problem."

FINE DINING AT ITS BEST

That night, we are treated to a special tasting menu at Peacock and Jones. With Ben as our host and the European-trained Volkmer in charge, expectations are high. A hopped malt whisky highball made with Belgrove's finest whets our appetites before four of Tom Gray's oysters with bacon jam and Worcestershire mayo pearl kick things off, followed by east coast sea urchin on toast, with burnt broccoli and radish. Bruny Island wallaby tartare, potato and hazelnut gnocchi featuring Anna Terry's truffles, Lyndall farm lamb, and finally wagyu Cross Beef accompanied by Tunnel Hill mushrooms follow in delicious succession. Replete, we somehow find space for brown butter and maple cremeux butternut ice cream. Each course is accompanied by a glass of wine from hand-picked Tasmanian wineries including Frogmore Creek and Hurly Burly.

Long considered one of the food bowls of Australia, from a population of just 500,000, Tasmania punches well above its weight, providing enough nourishment for 2.5 million. Our sojourn here, meeting inspired and inspiring producers and tasting their food and drink fresh from the land, has given us a greater appreciation for the hard work and love that goes into every bite we consumed. Each and every local we met was imbued with a passion for their work and their produce – and we board the plane back home to Sydney, just a little bit in love with the Apple Isle. 

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Tasmania has a number of beautiful drives, with stop-offs along the way to truly immerse yourself in this beautiful and unique destination. mindfood.com/tasmania-road-trips