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TWILIGHT ZONE
Katnook Estate vineyard
bathed in the evening sun.

WINE TRAVELLER

TEXT MAX ALLEN PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON GRIFFITHS



SPLENDID ISOLATION

Renowned for their elegance and richness, Coonawarra's reds have eased their way onto Australian wine lists and the world stage. Yet the region itself – just 20km-long and a humble outpost of terra rossa – remains a barely-trod jewel of the country's south.

WINE TRAVELLER

When Coonawarra was pronounced the Most Fabulous Wine Region in Australia at an international wine-tourism conference earlier this year, quite a few people were surprised – including some Coonawarra winemakers.

The announcement was bewildering, not because the grape traders of Coonawarra aren't proud of their wares – the district does have a convincing claim to being Australia's best red wine-producing region, after all – but because the remote, flat, narrow strip of land

in South Australia's south-east is hardly what you'd call a tourist mecca. A wine mecca, perhaps, but a tourist mecca, no. Don't get me wrong – I'd argue that this is possibly a better reason for visiting the place. Put bluntly, there aren't too many tourists hanging about cluttering up your experience.

An estimated 60,000 wine tourists visit Coonawarra annually. Sounds pretty good, but compare that to the 100,000 or so that troop through the tasting room of famously popular Brown Brothers in north-east Victoria, or the staggering 2.4 million people who swarm the Hunter Valley each year. It makes Coonawarra look refreshingly laid-back and crowd-free, except during events such as the Coonawarra Cup or Cabernet Celebrations weekend, when the place is buzzing.

Why so few visitors? Well, remoteness is certainly a factor: it's a five-hour drive from Melbourne, a four-hour slog from Adelaide, and a discouragingly bumpy small-plane trip (for aerophobics like me, at least) to Mount Gambier from either. But then again, two million people travel the Great Ocean Road between Melbourne and Adelaide each year, and that practically goes past Coonawarra, so you'd think more would make the half-hour detour from Mount Gambier. As a matter of fact, a bi-state promotion is encouraging people to do just this (for more information, visit www.greatsouthernouting.com.au).

I suspect one of the reasons for the relative lack of visitors is, ironically, overfamiliarity. Coonawarra's stellar 50-years-plus winemaking reputation has led to wide distribution of its wines across the country. The region's big producers – Southcorp (Penfolds, Wynns, etc), Beringer Blass (Mildara, Jamiesons Run), McWilliam's, Yalumba, Orlando and Hardys (Redman, Stepping Stone) – plus three medium-sized companies – Katnook, Rymill and Hollick – account for more than 80 per cent of the output, with many of the grapes these companies grow ending up in widely available commercial wines. Even the smaller producers such as Bowen, Zema and Balnaves have relatively good – and, more importantly, well-established – wholesale distribution.

So, if every decent restaurant and bottle shop across the country boasts a good selection of Coonawarra wine, the reasoning goes, why do we have to schlep all the way down there to taste or buy them? The answer is, of course, that wine often tastes so much better at the source. And this is just as true in Coonawarra as anywhere else.

THINGS OF STONE AND WOOD
Traditional cottages sit among
the rambling vines at Highbank.



Standing in one of the red strip's 20-odd cellar doors, sipping dark-purple cabernet and revelling in its herbal mulberry and cedar smells, its fine, powdery structure and concentrated fruit flavours while also drinking in the view – a sea of vines, distant gums, open sky and that hauntingly russet-tinged soil far from city life – it may sound like romantic twaddle until you've done it for yourself. Or, even better, discovering an old bottle of Coonawarra red, either at cellar door (many have museum stock for sale) or in the wonderful treasure trove of the Royal Oak bottle shop in Penola, then taking it back to your self-catered accommodation in a lovingly restored 1860s cottage and cooking up a storm (a roast leg of local lamb, perhaps, studded with rosemary and oregano you picked yourself from Penola's Petticoat Lane Herb Garden, slicked with Mrs Zema's olive oil from Zema Estate) – now that's my idea of wine tourism.

Research conducted by the University of Adelaide in 2002 found that the vast majority of people who visit Coonawarra are not the kind who want the golf course/hot-air ballooning/surfing wine holiday. Sure, they could visit the nearby Blue Lake, get lost in the Naracoorte Caves, get a lobster fix at Robe and go on plenty of walks, but visitors tend to be "serious" wine buffs, attracted primarily by the opportunity to taste and buy what they expect to be "great wine".

People who travel to Coonawarra also appreciate the contemplative mood of the place and the spirit of its people (the uni researchers didn't discover this; it's my own view, formed over years of observation). Until



my last stay in the region, when I had a good look around the excellent Mary McKillop Interpretive Centre and learned more about the well-known McKillop and the less familiar but no less extraordinary Father Julian Tension Woods, I hadn't made the link, but now I can't help feeling that the deep well of pioneering spirituality that existed – exists – in Penola must rub off on those who live there.

Sure, the Coonawarra winemakers have had their fair share of fierce debates over the years. There was that long-running, bitter dispute over the official boundary of the geographical indication; the ongoing argument about viticulture (in the red corner, machine-pruners; in the blue corner, hand-pruners); the constant tussle for other red grapes such as shiraz to be noticed amid the clamouring for cabernet; and the perennial face-off between lighter, more herbaceous (traditional?) styles of Coonawarra red and heavier, darker, riper (modern?) styles.

But there is also an amazing, tangible community spirit. Tea nights in the Coonawarra community hall take place on the last Friday of every month. The annual Cabernet Celebrations & Barrel Series Auction raises tens of thousands of dollars each year – this year for the Penola War Memorial Hospital.

If there was any remaining doubt that Coonawarra is on the “serious” wine tourist's list of must-visit places, consider this: one of the best new accommodation facilities is Punters Vineyard Retreat, a beautifully designed four-bedroom, self-catered house set well back from the highway among the vines. It's not cheap by Coonawarra standards – about A\$200 a night per couple – but at the time of writing it was booked out for weekends until next May.

Majella's Brian “Prof” Lynn sums up the Coonawarra experience perfectly: “We're miles from anywhere, it takes ages to get here, but when you do, the people are nice and the wines are very good.”

Okay, so it is pretty fabulous after all.

For wine and winery-related information, contact Coonawarra Vignerons, phone (08) 8737 2392, www.coonawarra.org. For general enquiries, contact the Penola/Coonawarra Visitor Information Centre, 27 Arthur St, Penola, SA, phone (08) 8737 2855, www.wattlerange.sa.gov.au. For accommodation, contact the South Australian Visitor & Travel Centre, phone 1300 655 404, www.southaustralia.com.



ROLL OUT THE BARRELS
Left: Ian and Wendy Hollick, owners of Hollick Wines.
Below: Upstairs at Hollick uses local produce to create rustic but innovative fare.

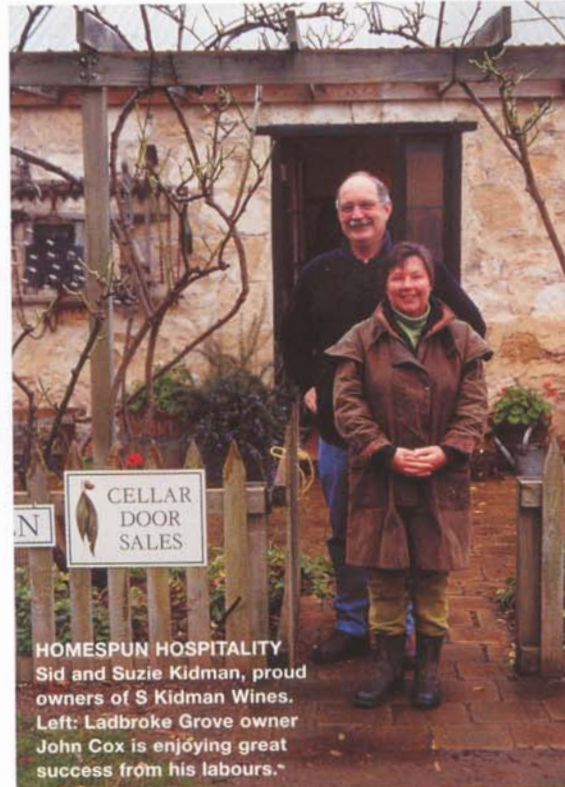


Cellar doors

It's five years since *WINE* visited Coonawarra for a Wine Traveller story. A lot has changed in that time: more than A\$12 million has been spent on cellar door upgrades and infrastructure. Some new cellars have opened (Patrick, Di Giorgio); some have closed (Gartners, Wetherall). Regardless, the great thing about touring Coonawarra is how ridiculously easy it still is to find all of the cellar doors: with a couple of exceptions, they're right on the highway, in many cases a short stroll – or easy bike ride – away from each other. This is a snapshot of every cellar door currently operating within the region. Opening hours vary, and some are only available by appointment. Phone ahead to confirm visiting times.

BALNAVES OF COONAWARRA

Main Road, Coonawarra, (08) 8737 2946, www.balnaves.com.au.
The Balnaves have lived in Coonawarra for ages, and the architecturally striking – yet welcoming – cellar door has been here since



HOMESPUN HOSPITALITY
Sid and Suzie Kidman, proud owners of S Kidman Wines.
Left: Ladbroke Grove owner John Cox is enjoying great success from his labours.

1991, but there's a freshness and friendliness that makes you think the place is brand new. Ask for the brilliant flagship wine, “The Tally” Reserve Cabernet (A\$80). The 2000 was close to selling out at the time of writing; the 2001 should be released by the time you read this.

BOWEN ESTATE

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra, (08) 8737 2229.
The winery building itself is cunningly disguised as a squat European chateau, while the cosy cellar door is hidden in a small house next door. This is family winemaking at its best – Doug and Joy Bowen's daughter,

WINE TRAVELLER



QUIET ACHIEVERS
Left to right: Bowen Estate wines; Highbank homestead; Katnook senior winemaker Wayne Stehbens and winemaker Tony Milanowski.



“We’re miles from anywhere, it takes ages to get here, but when you do, the people are nice and the wines are very good.”

Emma, has returned home and is working alongside her dad in both vineyard and cellar. The wines are exemplary.

BRAND'S OF COONAWARRA

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 3260, www.mcwilliams.com.au.

The old and the new. Three years ago, parent company McWilliam's built a very snazzy, light-filled cellar door around the original cellar, which was built by Captain Stentiford (who first planted vines here in the 1890s). You can peer at the dusty, bottle-stuffed cellar through a glass wall. Eric Brand, 87, moved onto the property in 1950 and still comes to the cellar door every day for a cup of tea.

DI GIORGIO FAMILY WINES

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 3222, www.digiorgio.com.au.

This place is bursting with energy. It's the old Rouge Homme winery, bought a couple of years ago from Southcorp by Limestone Coast grape growers the Di Giorgio family and given a much-needed lick of paint. The wines are good now, but the best are yet to come, as winemaker Pat Tacaciu becomes familiar with the vineyards around the winery.

HIGHBANK

Riddoch Hwy, (08) 8736 3311,
www.highbank.com.au.

Dennis and Bonnie Vice run a top-quality organic vineyard and offer a very comfortable, homely cellar-door experience (and accommodation). The red wines – refined, elegant but intense cabernets as well as the occasional

deep-tasting merlot – are limited-production and not widely distributed, so this is the best place to taste them and chat with the grower.

HOLLICK WINES

Cnr Ravenswood Lne and Riddoch Hwy,
Coonawarra, (08) 8737 2318, www.hollick.com.

A huge range of wines, some of which aren't available anywhere else, is on offer here in this smart and popular cellar door building. The restaurant – Upstairs at Hollick (see page 79) – is one of the region's best, and the view is unusual: not many places in Coonawarra rise above sea level (well, it feels like it).

JAMIESONS RUN

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 3380, www.jamiesonsrun.com.au.

Given the size of parent company Beringer Blass, the popularity of the brand and scale of other cellar doors and wineries in the Blass empire, it comes as a relief to find this cellar door is relatively small, relaxed and low-key. Winemaker Andrew Hales has, over the past couple of years, also introduced a welcome finesse and elegance to the wines.

KATNOOK ESTATE

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8737 2394, www.katnookestate.com.au.

To be frank, the Katnook cellar door feels a bit tired and dated – a bit unloved – but the wines can be good (particularly the reliable Katnook sauvignon blanc and the great-value Riddoch wines), and there are cellar-door exclusives on offer, including the quaffable range of wines made for golfer Nick Faldo.

LADBROKE GROVE

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra, (08) 8737 3777,
email ladbrokegrove@bigpond.com.

Established in 1982, Ladbroke Grove was bought by John Cox and Marie Valenzuela in 2000. The new owners have enjoyed exceptional success at various shows with a solid range of wines including the stunning 2001 Killian Vineyard Cabernet (A\$42). Currently, the cellar door is housed in an old 1950s radio-station building at the southern end of Coonawarra, but it will be moving to Ladbroke Grove's new, bigger winery building, located up behind Petaluma's Evans Vineyard to the north, next year.

LECONFIELD COONAWARRA

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra, (08) 8737 2326,
www.leconfielddatcoonawarra.com.

This small and thoroughly friendly cellar door reflects both the history of the winery – it dates back to the mid-1970s – and the infectious enthusiasm injected into the place by new(ish) winemaker Paul Gordon. The wines are good and the welcome is warm.

MAJELLA WINES

Lynn Rd, Coonawarra, (08) 8736 3055,
www.majellawines.com.au.

While the excellent wines here are enough in themselves to attract a steady stream of visitors to this modern, simple cellar door, most also come hoping to have a chat with Brian “Prof” Lynn, whose family has been farming the Coonawarra land (and growing grapes) for decades. If the Prof's on form, the anecdotes and opinions flow thick and fast.



CHARDY

VINTAGE MEMORIES
Wines gathering dust at
Brand's of Coonawarra.

PINOT NOIR



COTTAGE INDUSTRY
Penola offers modest but cosy colonial-style accommodation.

I can't help feeling that the deep well of pioneering spirituality that existed in Penola must rub off on those who live there.

PARKER COONAWARRA ESTATE

Riddoch Hwy,
Coonawarra, (08) 8737 3525,
www.parkercoonawarraestate.com.au.

This immaculate winery is currently owned by the Rathbone brothers (who have Yerling Station in the Yarra Valley and Mount Langi Ghiran in the Grampians), but apart from plans to start serving cheese and pâté in the cellar door, it's business as usual – making and selling some of the region's most sophisticated wines.

PATRICK T WINES

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8737 3687, www.patricktwines.com.

This is the newest cellar door to open (in the old Wetherall building) and is still finding its feet. When I visited, the place was rather plain and unfinished, and the red wines – which are made by Pat Tocaciu, who is winemaker at Di Giorgio – were somewhat oak-dominant and unbalanced.

PENLEY ESTATE

McLeans Rd, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 3211, www.penley.com.au.

Housed in nothing more, really, than a just big, galvanised shed, this dimly lit cellar door is packed with owner Kym Tolley's fascinating memorabilia (he is a descendant of the old Penfold and Tolley families). For such a small winery, there is a surprisingly big range of very consistent wines on offer, including some back vintages of Penley's internationally acclaimed cabernets.

PUNTERS CORNER WINE

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8737 2007, www.punterscorner.com.au.

This is an architecturally striking cellar door, utilising corrugated iron and local timber, crammed with horseracing imagery (the Jimmy Watson Trophy-winning Spartacus shiraz was named after a racehorse) and some of the best-value wines in the region.

REDMAN WINES

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 3331, www.redman.com.au.

Walking into the Redman cellar door is like walking back into the 1970s: the yellow labels have barely changed over three decades, the pictures and awards that line the walls are straight from that era, and if you twist Bruce or Mal Redman's arm hard enough, they may sell you a magnum or two of late '70s "claret".

RYMILL COONAWARRA

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 5001, www.rymill.com.au.

The showpiece of the region. This vast cellar door is simply a must-visit Coonawarra destination. The wines are good – occasionally excellent – but the views over the winery and immaculately tended vineyard are fabulous.

S KIDMAN WINES

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 5071, www.kidmanwines.com.au.

In Coonawarra's most northerly cellar door, housed in a tiny 1859 stables building, the Kidmans offer some extremely down-to-earth

hospitality and good, straightforward wines, including leafy cabernet and spicy shiraz. Prices are reasonable, too: A\$13-20.

WYNNS COONAWARRA ESTATE

Memorial Dve, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 2225, www.wynns.com.au.

Parent company Southcorp has spared no expense in rejuvenating this historic cellar door over the past few years. It's now a very good combination of modern tasting facility, sensitive heritage renovation and informative cultural centre. Even if you're familiar with the Wynns brand, it's worth visiting: older vintages, exclusive bottlings and hard-to-get wines are often offered for tasting and sale.

YALUMBA – THE MENZIES WINE ROOM

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8737 3603, www.yalumba.com.

This eco-aware, rammed-earth building is one of the most serene and stylish cellar doors in the region. As well as the Menzies cabernet itself – made from grapes grown around the building – wines from Yalumba's Wrattenbully vineyards can also be tasted.

ZEMA ESTATE

Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra,
(08) 8736 3219, www.zema.com.au.

The Zema family's Calabrian heritage can be seen in the 2000 olive trees on the property and the superb homemade salamis and sausages that are brought out for festivals and celebrations. The reds are robust, full-throated expressions of Coonawarra.

Wines to try

2002 Bowen Estate Shiraz, A\$26.50/NZ\$33.25

One of the most highly regarded small-scale producers, Bowen Estate is particularly adept with shiraz, and this spicy, medium-bodied but intense, wild-berry-tasting wine is a great example. It's a shade better, I think, than the admittedly terrific 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon.

2002 Di Giorgio Pinot Noir, A\$25

Tasted as a tank sample and due for release at the end of the year, this lovely, ripe-tasting, full-bodied pinot noir shatters all prejudice that the variety can't grow well in Coonawarra.

2004 Hollick Sauvignon Blanc Semillon, A\$16.50/NZ\$16.50

A crisp, snappy, full-of-life white. Also look for the limited-release 2003 Hollaia – a juicy, sangiovese cabernet blend made mostly from grapes grown in Wrattenbully.

2001 Jamiesons Run Rothwell Cabernet Sauvignon, A\$80

Unequivocally the best red wine I've ever tasted from Jamiesons Run. An exceptionally concentrated and elegant cabernet; the essence of the variety and the region, and worth every cent.

2001 Ladbroke Grove Killian Cabernet Sauvignon, A\$42

A deserving multi-award-winner, this is a succulent, serious cabernet. Also try the perfumed 2002 Shiraz Viognier (A\$28) and the lovely, crisp, quaffable 2004 Flat Broke Lad Chardonnay (A\$15).

2004 Leconfield Riesling, A\$19.95/NZ\$21

These red wines have improved markedly since Paul Gordon took the reins, but Gordon's passion for riesling has also rubbed off on this pristine wine. Also try the 2002 Leconfield Sparkling Shiraz (A\$25.95/NZ\$27).

2002 Majella Cabernet, A\$32

Some of the most generously flavoured and plush red wines in Coonawarra; for me, the 2002 Cabernet is the star, but the meaty 2002 Shiraz (A\$32/NZ\$36.95) and dark, swirling 2001 Majella "The Mallee" Cabernet Shiraz (A\$68/NZ\$77.95) aren't far behind.

2001 Parker Coonawarra Estate Terra Rossa First Growth, A\$79.95

This supremely elegant, intense red blend (cabernet sauvignon with 15 per cent merlot) is solid, powdery, rich and dense. Also try the juicy 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon (A\$35) and the herbal, elegant 2001 Merlot (A\$49.95).

2000 Penley Estate

The Traveller Shiraz, A\$65

Kym Tolley's red wines are usually robust and full-flavoured, but this takes it to another level: smoky, complex and rich, it's a terrific example of how well shiraz can do here.

2001 Punters Corner

Cabernet Sauvignon, A\$30

This is one of the best-value cabernets in Coonawarra: restrained, multi-layered, lingering and just gorgeous. The complex, spicy 2001 Shiraz (A\$25) is also great value.

2000 Rymill Cabernet Sauvignon, A\$28

Easily the best cabernet Rymill has ever made, and although at four years old it's already beginning to drink well, it should age for a good few years yet. Also try the juicy, herbaceous 2004 Sauvignon Blanc (A\$15).

2000 Yalumba Menzies Cabernet Sauvignon, A\$35.95/NZ\$41

This wine is available in restaurants and bottle shops, but somehow, tasting it in the elegant surroundings of the Yalumba Wine Room enhances its delicate, blackcurrant flavours.

2001 Zema Estate Family Selection Cabernet Sauvignon, A\$45

Excellent red with an Italian accent. It has ripe mulberry fruit and some sophisticated oak, but there's an underlying gutsy taste, making it a superb wine for full-flavoured food.

Where to eat

Breakfast: *Divine, Church St, Penola, (08) 8737 2122.* Local chef Susie Chant is on to a winner with this wonderful cafe/food store. Food and value are amazing: bacon, wagyu sausages, eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes, spinach, and toasted Turkish bread, all for A\$15. Divine is also the best place to start if you're stocking up for a self-catered weekend away. Open 9am-5pm daily.

Cafe: *Redfingers, Memorial Dve, Coonawarra, (08) 8736 3006.* You can trust a place where the locals eat. Good grills, salads and satisfying curries are the order of the day. Mains are about A\$20 and portions are generous. Open Monday to Saturday from 10am; Sundays from 9am; breakfast, lunch and dinner daily.

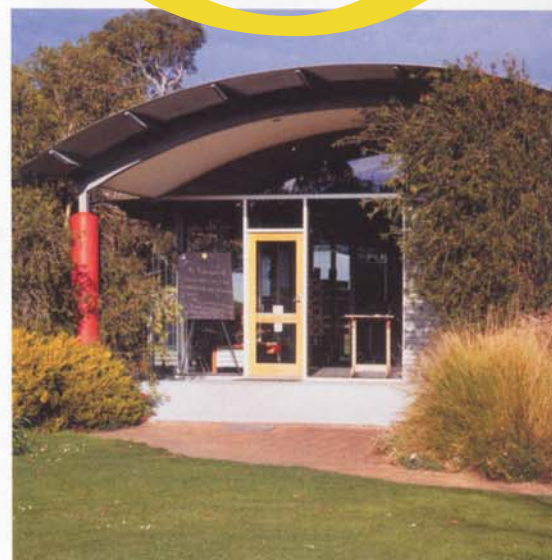
Winery restaurant: *Upstairs at Hollick, (08) 8737 2752, www.hollick.com.* You simply can't go to Coonawarra and not have lunch here. It's not the region's cheapest place – entrées are about A\$16 and mains A\$26 – but it is very, very good. Open for lunch daily; dinner Friday and Saturday.

Special dinner: *Pipers of Penola, Riddoch St, (08) 8737 3999, www.pipersofpenola.com.au.* One of the best dishes I ate in Coonawarra recently was chef Tim Foster's rabbit, pancetta and tarragon tortellini in a chardonnay and mustard cream sauce. Open for dinner from 6pm, Monday to Saturday.

Friday-night bistro: *Prince of Wales Hotel, 58 Church St, Penola, (08) 8737 2402.* This is where the locals hang out. As you're enjoying a cleansing ale or two after a hard day's tasting, waiting for your above-average-quality pie and mash or fish and chips, you can catch up with the cellar-door staff and winemakers you've bumped into throughout the day.

Where to stay

Heywards Royal Oak Hotel, 31 Church St, Penola, (08) 8737 2322. This is a fabulous, old hotel, with wide verandas, four-poster beds, and a great bottle shop stuffed with old Coonawarra wines and imported bottles.



Chardonnay Lodge, Riddoch Hwy, Coonawarra, (08) 8736 3309, www.chardonnaylodge.com.au. The decor may be stuck in the '80s – pine woodwork and exposed-brick walls – but the service and food are good and reliable.

Highbank Vineyard, (08) 8736 3311. Highbank offers The Cottage, for two couples, and Room with a View, above the cellar door.

Cameron's Cottage, Davis Crescent, Penola, (08) 8762 3613. This lovingly restored 1860s building has a tranquil atmosphere and quirky details. It is the best cottage accommodation I saw on my last visit. Others are: *Cobb & Co Cottages, 2 Portland St, Penola, (08) 8737 2526, www.cobbnco.com; Georgie's Cottage, Riddoch St, Penola, (08) 8737 2564.*

Punters Vineyard Retreat, (08) 8737 2007, www.punterscorner.com.au. The best digs to be found in the district, with exceptional facilities, catering and an airy design.

For further details, phone 1800 600 262 or visit www.coonawarradiscovery.com.

To source wines, see page 155. ♪