

Hunters & collectors

From some of the world's freshest fish and organic produce to fine cheeses, truffles, samphire and strawberries, Australia offers good food hunting. Carli Ratcliff forages for some of the best.

HOT ON TOURISM operators' radar right now is the demand for gourmet hunter-gatherer experiences; many travellers today want to connect with locals and gain exposure to artisan expertise and tradition.

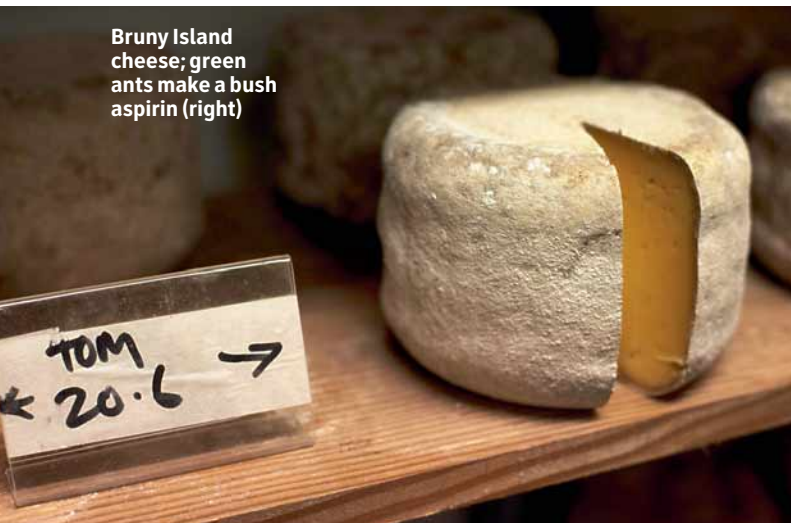
No longer content with mainstream holiday activities, adventurous foodies are keen for exclusive access to specialist sustainable produce in unique locations. Resorts are adding hands-on classes to their programs, from digging a kitchen garden on the Gold Coast to searching for bush tucker in the Kimberley. Excursions range from shucking oysters in pristine Coffin Bay, South Australia, to hunting truffles in the forests of Manjimup, Western Australia, and learning to cook a Wessex Saddleback pig in the Hobart hinterland of Tasmania.

Budget-conscious travellers can join Willing Workers on Organic Farms, or WWOOF (www.woof.com.au). This network – of more than 1200 organic orchardists, vegetable growers, meat and dairy producers across Australia – offers visitors the opportunity to learn organic farming practices as they assist farmers with the day-to-day work. At the other end of the spectrum there are plenty of upper-scale culinary tours including Maeve O'Meara's Gourmet Safaris.

Whether you are an individual keen to forage, a family eager to explore its food source or a company seeking team-building adventures, these experiences promise an invigorating and inspiring sojourn – and an interesting tale to tell. Here are some appetisers around the country. ▶

FOOD TRAILS

Bruny Island cheese; green ants make a bush aspirin (right)



A THREE-DAY TOUR INCLUDING A MORNING AT AUSTRALIA'S ONLY ORGANIC SHEEP CHEESERY

Bush Tucker

Kakadu Animal Tracks Gagudju Lodge Cooinda (near Yellow Waters), Kakadu National Park, NT. (08) 8979 0145.

www.animaltracks.com.au

Accountant Sean Arnold gave up corporate life in London for Yellow Waters Billabong in Kakadu National Park and has been escorting groups on Indigenous food and wildlife tours since 2000. Guests visit Kakadu Buffalo Farm, which provides bush meats (buffalo, magpie geese and wild pig) to the Aboriginal community. Indigenous elder Patsy Raglar joins the tour most days for traditional hunting and gathering, pointing out water chestnuts and grassland tubers, revealing bush cures (green ants for headache and flu) and peeling paperbark to wrap fish and meat before they go in the ground oven. Tours May-October, \$175 adults, \$135 children.

Arnhem Land Eco-Cultural Tours (08) 8979 5946. maningrida.com/tourism

Based at Maningrida, 500km north-east of Darwin. Aboriginal hosts lead long discovery walks over rocky escarpments, through paperbark swamps and across fertile floodplains, pointing out medicinal and bush foods and searching for wildlife. Elders demonstrate traditional hunting methods, which may include digging for crabs among the mangroves or fishing for

barramundi in muddy shallows with a spear you fashion yourself. The area is also home to buffalo, brolgas, pigs, dingos, goannas and crocodiles. One, two and three-day packages from \$495 per day.

The Bush Camp Faraway Bay Kununurra, WA. (08) 9169 1214. farawaybay.com.au

Guests arrive at Faraway Bay, 280km north-west of Kununurra, by charter plane. The Bush Camp, on a headland with views of the Timor Sea, caters for just 12 guests. Host Bruce Ellison is a former buffalo and crocodile hunter. The four-day Bush Tucker and Camp Oven School in June includes guided walks to source native lemongrass, rock figs and bush passionfruit. Celebrity Sydney chef Pete Evans and Perth chef Chris Taylor also teach specialist four-day programs. Participants cooking local trevally, spanish mackerel and mangrove jack in the open-air kitchen may even spy a croc or two. Four-day food packages from \$4950 per person.

Cheese

McIntosh & Bowman Cheese Education & Appreciation 0422 728 505.

www.mcintoshandbowman.com.au

Cheesemonger and educator Claudia McIntosh hosts a three-day tour of southern

Tasmania's finest cheesemakers, including a morning at Australia's only organic sheep cheesery, Grandvewe, and an afternoon with Swiss-born cheesemakers Hans Stutz and Esther Haeusermann on their goat farm. The final day sees an excursion to Bruny Island for a workshop with acclaimed cheesemaker Nick Haddow of the Bruny Island Cheese Company. Back home in Sydney, McIntosh teaches weekend cheese-making and tasting workshops. Three-day packages from \$2200, all-inclusive.

Culinary tours

Gourmet Safaris (02) 9960 5675.

www.gourmetsafaris.com.au

Food writer/TV presenter Maeve O'Meara's Gourmet Safaris runs six-day excursions to Kangaroo Island, South Australia. Your base is a beach house; your guide is British-born chef Sue Pearson, who shares the secrets of Kangaroo Island's magnificent produce: honey, lobster and marron (crayfish), lamb and native grasses. Scour the shoreline for emerald marsh samphire, the coastal vegetable prized by the world's best chefs. A visit to the honey co-op is an opportunity to stock up on the island's highly sought-after honey. Produced by the world's only pure strain of Ligurian bees, it's got to be the sweet souvenir of choice. Kangaroo Island tour \$2395 per person. ➤

FOOD TRAILS

Melbourne Food Tours

0408 555 679. www.melbournefoodtours.com

Join Allan Campion and Michelle Curtis (authors of *The Foodies' Guide To Melbourne*) for a day sampling Victorian delights. Go behind the scenes, meet producers and purveyors on their Foodies' Tours of Melbourne. Or take the Team Culinary Challenge. "Contestants" are divided into four teams (Italian, Moroccan, Spanish and Vietnamese), assigned ingredients and a handful of recipes, then pitted against each other. Melbourne CBD walking tours \$115, Culinary Challenge \$165 a person.

The Agrarian Kitchen

650 Lachlan Road, Lachlan, Tasmania.

(03) 6261 1099. www.theagrariankitchen.com

In Tasmania's Derwent Valley, a 45-minute drive from Hobart, Rodney Dunn's Agrarian Kitchen is an altar to artisan production. The former food editor of *Australian Gourmet Traveller* magazine, Dunn was once apprentice to Tetsuya Wakuda. He established the school with his wife, Séverine, to encourage an appreciation of seasonal cooking. The Agrarian Experience class begins with guests wandering through the vegetable garden and fossicking in the surrounding countryside. Produce picked, Dunn instructs the group in the creation of a menu. Bespoke classes are available for groups, and Dunn has enlisted a team of local experts to teach specialist classes including the Whole Hog, a two-day workshop that covers butchering and cooking a pig from nose to tail. The one-day Agrarian Experience costs \$275; the Whole Hog two-day masterclass \$660.

Hazelnuts

Riverview Homestead & Hazelnuts

173 Wallaroo Road, Hall, ACT.

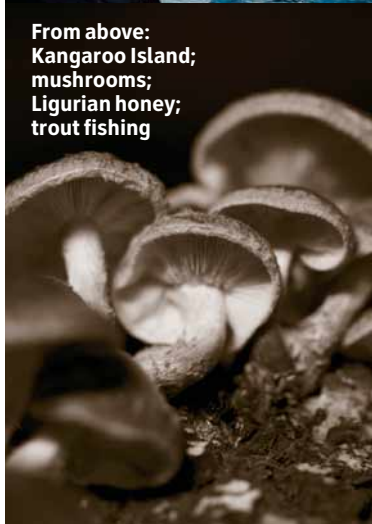
(02) 6230 2637.

www.riverviewhomestead.com

Just a 20-minute drive from the Canberra CBD, Riverview Homestead on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River is a working organic hazelnut farm. During the season (January-February) walk amongst the 1000 hazelnut trees to pick large atlas, small and sweet Italian varieties, and unique felicia hazelnuts at your leisure. Pay by weight.



From above: Kangaroo Island; mushrooms; Ligurian honey; trout fishing



A TWO-DAY WORKSHOP THAT COVERS BUTCHERING AND COOKING A PIG FROM NOSE TO TAIL

Mushrooms

Oberon Visitor Information Centre

44-48 Ross Street, Oberon, NSW.

(02) 6329 8210. oberonaustralia.com.au

Three hours' drive west of Sydney, Oberon Visitor Information Centre offers mushroom hunters maps and advice on identifying edible fungus. The surrounding Blacksprings and Jenolan State Forests abound with pretty saffron milk cap and slippery jack mushrooms with bright yellow gills from late January until May. Free.

Olives

Gaeta Valley Organic Olives

1532 Gaeta Road, Gaeta Valley, Gaeta, Qld.

(07) 4156 3519. www.gaeta-organics.com

In the Gaeta Valley, olives are ripe for the picking in February and March. Terry and Maureen Rundell's Gaeta Valley Organic Olives are the first olives harvested in Australia each year. Reminiscent of Italian and French olive-growing regions, the grove of 800 trees drips with manzanillo, frantoia and azapa varieties of olives. Organic extra virgin olive oil is made on site (less than 24 hours from tree to bottle) and sold at the farm gate. Entry free, olives priced by weight.

Organic vegetables

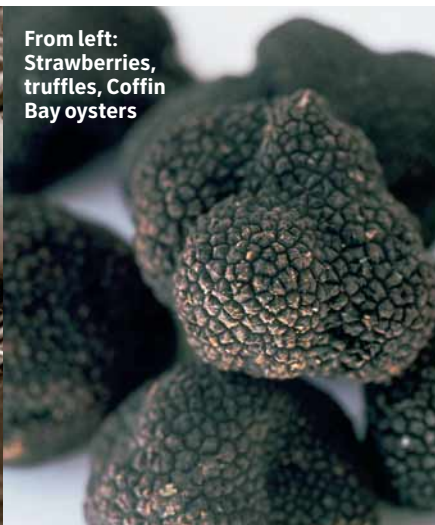
Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat

192 Syndicate Road, Tallebudgera Valley, Queensland. 1800 219 272. gwinganna.com

In the lush Gold Coast hinterland lies this health retreat with a difference. Guests can be pampered and pummeled in the 33-room spa, but they can also do hands-on activities >



From left:
Strawberries,
truffles, Coffin
Bay oysters



THERE IS NO BETTER OYSTER THAN ONE PLUCKED AND SHUCKED OUT OF PURE WATER ”

such as kitchen garden and cooking sessions with chef and organic gardener, Shelley Prior. Resident bush-tucker man John Palmer leads morning bush walks through Tallebudgera Valley, pointing out (and munching on) edible weeds and flowers. In the afternoon he teaches a class on “no-dig” gardens, showing guests how to grow organic food. Good health, from the ground up. Three-night Organic Living packages from \$1245.

Oysters

The Coffin Bay Explorer
Coffin Bay, South Australia.
0428 880 621.

www.coffinbayexplorer.com

Spend the day gathering your own oysters at Coffin Bay. En route to the oyster leases, skipper and oyster expert Darian Gale will explain how they are farmed. Home to oyster operations since the 1870s, the area was once famous for its native mud oysters, but now it's the popular pacific variety, which is supplied to restaurants nationwide. Gale says there is no better oyster than one “plucked and shucked,” straight out of the bay's pure waters. He hauls a pile of oysters into the boat and shows how to shuck them. Seconds after they are out of the water, everyone is enjoying oysters for breakfast. Adults \$75, children \$40.

Strawberries

Ricardoes Tomatoes & U-Pick Strawberry Farm

221 Blackmans Point Road, Port Macquarie, NSW. (02) 6585 0663. www.ricardoes.com

Brothers Richard and Anthony Sarkis own and run Ricardoes Tomatoes and the U-Pick Strawberry Farm, where visitors can pick their own strawberries from more than 30,000 plants. Bucket in hand, wander the rows seeking (and sampling) big red berries then weigh your haul for the price. Six types of tomatoes (two first prize-winners at this year's Sydney Royal Easter Show) are sold at the farm gate. Free entry to farm; strawberries and tomatoes by weight.

Trout

Tuki Trout Farm

60 Stoney Rises Road, Smeaton, Victoria.
(03) 5345 6233. tuki.com.au

At Tuki Trout Farm, Smeaton (20km from foodie hub Daylesford), you are guaranteed a catch. Follow the winding driveway through sheep and cattle paddocks until you reach the comfortable self-contained cottages. Farmers Jan and Robert Jones are proponents of local, sustainable food, reflected in their restaurant's menu. Pick up a rod and wander out to one of the natural spring-fed ponds teeming with rainbow trout. Chefs will prepare your

catch to your requirements for lunch or dinner. Adults \$8, children \$4, rod hire \$5, plus trout (cleaned and packed) \$14/kg.

Truffles

The Wine & Truffle Company
Seven Day Road, Manjimup, WA.
(08) 9777 2474. wineandtruffle.com.au

A three-and-a-half-hour drive south of Perth, this is the Southern Hemisphere's largest producer of black truffles (*tuber melanosporum*). Follow dogs and expert guides through the *truffière*, a 21ha hazelnut and oak forest. The dogs scratch excitedly as they pick up the scent 30cm below ground. Digging carefully around the base of a young oak tree, truffle farmer Damon Boorman unearths the first truffle of the day. Guests inhale the pungency then later shave their bounty onto a bowl of handmade fettuccini with toasted hazelnuts or tuck into a wine and truffle beef pie. Simulated hunts are staged out of season. Hunts and tastings from \$95.

2010 Truffle Festival

www.trufflefestival.com.au

The 2010 Truffle Festival in Canberra (June) will feature hunts, tastings, truffle-grading workshops and dinners showcasing the diversity of the black gold. Events will also be held in the burgeoning truffle country of Orange, and in Sydney.