

- + Best-in-class cooking schools
- + Where Neil Perry eats in between meals
- + Australia's next-generation pinot noir

Magic moments
Show-stopping restaurants for special occasions.



Harvard Wang

↑
Davidson plum with
herbs and wildflowers
at Vue de Monde in
Melbourne

Quisine.





be simple, flavoursome and driven by fresh produce. We begin at 9am, sipping caffè lattes around a communal table before moving into the spacious kitchen at the rear of the premises. We're an eclectic bunch of eight, including a lawyer and barrister couple, a social worker, a building developer and an octogenarian enjoying a day out with her daughters. We have varying degrees of culinary expertise but we're all here to learn how to make pasta from a master. That's no hyperbole: Matteo spent five years teaching at Academia Barilla in Parma, Italy.

It's a hands-on experience. Over several hours we knead flour and water to form pasta sheets (push and roll, apparently, rather than pound – "It's not CPR!" instructs Carboni); massage focaccia dough with olive oil ("This creates the deliciousness of the dish"); and shape gnocchi into rolls (potato quality is paramount – "You want to taste the potato").

Charming and lively, Carboni peppers his class with anecdotes of cooking with his nonna, Pia – just as you'd expect from a good Italian boy – and his casually imparted culinary tips come quick and often. We learn that all fresh pasta can be frozen. ("Always make more than you need.") Also, the colder the cream, the easier it is to whip. And pesto will oxidise less if you store it in a pre-chilled container. Who knew?

Lesson finished and stomachs rumbling, we reconvene around the communal table to enjoy the results of our labour: crisp focaccia with local cheeses and cured meats; pillow-like gnocchi with a vibrant pesto;

School's in!

You won't be tempted to cut class at these cooking courses around Australia. Local chefs are sharing their trade secrets with anyone hungry to learn, writes **Jo McKay**.



THE HANDS-ON TUTORIAL

IN the leafy Barossa town of Angaston, Casa Carboni could be mistaken for a chic café in Italy. Outside there's a cheerful striped awning and terracotta pot plants; inside, an espresso machine dominates the servery and the bright-red walls are lined with kitchenwares. Certainly, it's a delightful spot for a midday meal or, on a Friday evening, a post-work glass of vino – but the real heart of this establishment is the kitchen, the epicentre of Casa Carboni's cooking school.

Run by husband-and-wife team Matteo and Fiona Carboni, Casa Carboni Italian Cooking School & Enoteca (casacarboni.com.au) offers Taste of Italy cooking classes several times a week, with the regional focus changing throughout the year. Today's subject is Ligurian cuisine, which tends to

(Clockwise from top) Matteo Carboni leads pasta-making classes at Casa Carboni Italian Cooking School & Enoteca; the chef's nettle tagliatelle with farm-fresh cherry tomatoes, herbs and aged goat's cheese (opposite)

buttery pansotti di patate (potato ravioli); and silky coffee mousse. Bliss.

We wrap up midafternoon so it's easy to do this class in a daytrip from Adelaide (the Barossa is just over an hour's drive from the CBD) but an overnight stay allows time for touring vineyards. Splash out and book in to one of the elegant suites at The Louise (thelouise.com.au) in Marananga, about 10 minutes' drive from the cooking school.

THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

IT'S an autumn afternoon in the rolling hills of Tasmania's North West and I'm standing in a large, straw-lined shed with a somewhat unexpected companion. Attached to my index and middle fingers is a day-old dairy calf – she's sucking wildly, as though my digits might magically deliver milk. Although my hand is covered in slimy cow saliva, I'm a goner – those big brown eyes and that eager, docile face.

Proximity to produce is what today is all about on a Food by Ben One Degree Food Tour (benmilbourne.com.au), the brainchild of 2012 *MasterChef* alumnus Ben Milbourne. It's a daylong extravaganza that has so far included meandering through micro-herb and salad patches at York Town Organics, feeding fish at salmon farm 41° South Tasmania and perusing the sun-drenched garden beds of not-for-profit Produce to the People Tasmania. Now we're at Ashgrove dairy, learning about cheese, milk and cream, and getting gooey over newborn calves.

Still on the agenda: wineries, chocolate artisans and more, with eating and sampling at each stop along the way. Later, in the shade of a crabapple tree on the grounds of Fairholme, the picturesque estate that Milbourne calls home, we'll learn how to poach pears. He'll then create a five-course meal for our dinner.

The One Degree experiences – so named because of Milbourne's philosophy that produce in this region has only one degree of separation ("You can always directly connect with the person who grew it") – are a jam-packed blend of food tour, cooking demo and fine dining. Mostly, these tours operate on demand so each is different, crafted by Milbourne based on which producers have the best crop at the time. In winter, that might mean truffle-hunting and unearthing root vegies; come summertime, perhaps picking cherries or touring orchards. That's not to say Milbourne finds it easy to devise the itineraries. "There are so many producers that I want to show off!" he says.

Cape Lodge chef Michael Elfwing (below); his Fallen Apples dish (right); food-tour guide Ben Milbourne (bottom)



Milbourne's enthusiasm is ever present: he talks of his love for Tasmania and his admiration for local growers and waxes lyrical about smart farming techniques. He was a science teacher before *MasterChef* and he's certainly utilising that skill set now. "It's the same thing," he says. "Trying to educate people about food by breaking it down and making it entertaining and enjoyable. This is my classroom, here, in the car."

Milbourne chatters as he drives – having such an affable chauffeur means it's easy to enjoy the passing scenery of undulating green pastures and, in the distance, the hammered-metal shimmer of Bass Strait. Pick-up and drop-off from accommodation

is included. For many, this will mean the comfortable Quality Hotel Gateway (gatewayinn.com.au) in Devonport, though Milbourne will happily travel further afield so it's worth considering Airbnb options and guesthouses in the region. Because he fits tours in between travelling, filming *Ben's Menu* and running his in-home restaurant, it's wise to book in advance; however, Milbourne and his team are so eminently flexible that they'll also arrange a tour with only a few days' notice if they can. Bear in mind, too, the intent here is intimacy so small groups are best.

We gather in Milbourne's dining room for dinner, a stomach-defying dégustation (given we've been eating all day) that includes Mexican tortillas, kingfish ceviche, roast pork belly and seared lamb. Each dish delights but it's the abalone, which Milbourne caught, done fish-and-chips style that thrills the most. Crunchy, salty and textural, it's a triumph. As we finish our final course – and just when I think I can't possibly fit any more in – Milbourne rushes back to the kitchen. He returns, bearing yet another platter: locally made wallaby prosciutto and salami. "I just want you to try it!" he says earnestly. How could we possibly refuse?

THE MASTERCLASS

"DON'T be shy – ask lots of questions." These are the instructions of executive chef Michael Elfwing at his Saturday cooking class at Cape Lodge (capelodge.com.au; see page 145) in WA's Margaret River region. "Everyone's having coffee?" he asks, scanning the room. "Good."

Although classes here can cater for up to 30 people, ours is a cosy group of no more than 12. It's mostly couples, all culinary wannabes, sitting politely on comfy armchairs arranged to face Elfwing's mobile kitchen station. We're in the lounge bar adjacent to the dining room, a space that's gloriously bright. Light floods in through large windows that overlook a lagoon encircled by peppermint trees. Such a bush idyll is a splendid backdrop for a gastronomic tutorial.

"Today is about beef," starts Elfwing. "You bought some beef one day and it was great but the next time it wasn't. I'll explain what you bought, what happened and why it tasted the way it did." And with no more fanfare, we're away. The focus is on recipes: red salad, sticky beef brisket in steamed buns, veal rib eye on the bone with crisp potatoes and béarnaise sauce and, to finish, brie ice-cream. "Cheese is from beef, right?" he says with a wry smile.

Elfwing is a native Swede with a serious food pedigree, having worked alongside top names such as Heston Blumenthal, Simon Bryant and Cheong Liew. With several slabs of meat on his chopping board – oyster blade, brisket, tenderloin and veal rib – he shows us how to make each dish... but this is more than straight-up recipe demos.

We talk about labelling: "You get tricked. 'Stewing beef' – what's that? Anything can be stewing beef." He deliberates on feed: "Grass-fed – great flavour but not so tender." He advises on cooking methods: "Heavily seared and still red is a poorly cooked rare. Put it in the oven after searing; it's a lot gentler." He talks about cuts and variations in price, plus the difference between yearlings (which many supermarkets sell) and aged beef (that richer, redder meat found hanging in specialty butchers) and how that affects taste and texture.

In a word, his advice is useful. Though his restaurant offers five-star fine dining, Elfwing's two-hour lesson is all about the takeaway: the tips you can use in your kitchen back home. It's no surprise, then, that these courses often book out months in advance (truffle- and marron-themed classes, in particular, are in high demand) and I'm certain the convivial four-course lunch with wine that follows is a strong drawcard.

Although you don't need to be a hotel guest to participate, it's worth staying at the lodge. The rooms are airy and luxurious, the grounds are verdant and peaceful and, after the demo and long lunch, it's a short roll back to your suite for a digestive nap. ●



Best of the rest

SA

KI Food Safari

For an immersive experience that lasts longer than most, the KI Food Safari is an impressive eight-day epicurean retreat led by Maggie Beer at the incomparable Southern Ocean Lodge (southernoceanlodge.com.au) on Kangaroo Island. Past safari chefs have included Mark Best and Damien Pignolet. The KI Food Safari 2016 is already sold out but rest assured it's an annual event.

TAS

The Agrarian Kitchen

Under the tutelage of co-founder Rodney Dunn, the cooking classes at The Agrarian Kitchen (theagrariankitchen.com) in Lachlan, about 45 minutes' drive from Hobart, are a charming hands-on experience that may involve foraging in the garden before cooking and lunch.

NSW

River Cottage Australia Cooking School

Located in Tilba, on NSW's South Coast, this establishment offers the chance to cook alongside TV chef Paul West or one of his experts from the show *River Cottage Australia* (keofilms.com.au/cook).

QLD

Spirit House

Those wanting a little heat – both on the tastebuds and in the air –

should head north to Spirit House (spirithouse.com.au), an Asian-focused restaurant and cooking school in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland.

VIC

Lake House

In picturesque Daylesford, Alla Wolf-Tasker's Lake House (lakehouse.com.au) has a strong schedule of cooking tutorials and masterclasses throughout the year. Expect expert instruction from the likes of Adriano Zumbo and Frank Camorra.

NSW

Biota

For topnotch tuition, look to two-hatted Biota (biotadining.com) in Bowral, in the Southern Highlands. Chef James Viles and his team run themed workshops such as butchery, natural bread-making and cooking with vegetables. The package includes accommodation and dinner in the celebrated restaurant.

The Agrarian Kitchen (above) offers paddock-to-plate cooking experiences; Maggie Beer (right) headlines this year's KI Food Safari

