

Aubergine restaurant,  
Canberra dining at its best



STORY BY Steve Waterson

# A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Small but perfectly formed, the food and wine scene in Canberra is closing in on its big-city rivals



**W**ith five years in Vanuatu under his belt, two celebrity chef brothers in Melbourne and the kind of talent that opens international doors, why is Sean McConnell in Canberra?

"It's a beautiful city," says the executive chef of two of the capital's most highly regarded restaurants, Mocan and Green Groat and Monster Kitchen and Bar. "I like living here; I love its simplicity."

That simplicity is mirrored in McConnell's food – "We try to have no more than four ingredients on the plate," he says – but it's no obstacle to success, as Monster has been festooned with praise, hats and awards since it opened in the ultra-hip Hotel Hotel, in the uber-hip NewActon corner of town two years ago, including a prestigious spot on today's *Weekend Australian Magazine* Hot 50 Restaurants list.

While complex, multi-ingredient, fussy food can sometimes dazzle the diner, simple food brings technique and produce into the open. McConnell's skills are never in doubt, but he also delights in the raw materials he works with.

"Our produce in the Canberra region is beautiful," he says. "When I was working in Vanuatu there were no big wholesalers, so sourcing local produce was a necessity. I had to go into villages and meet farmers, and when I returned to Canberra I spent the first year forging the same kind of relationships, going to farmers' markets, meeting producers.

"When we opened Mocan and Green Groat we were able to source 95 per cent of our produce from the Canberra region. We get beautiful free-range pork and beef from a wonderful property near Young – they say their cattle are so free range you can't find them."

## THE VIEW FROM THE GALLERY

We asked a selection of Parliament House journalists for their favourite places to eat, drink and relax; here are their recommendations for Canberra after dark

**OTTOMAN**, in Barton, one of the top Canberra restaurants, very popular with polities and senior business and public-service types

**ITALIAN AND SONS**, in Braddon (go there if you want to see polities, from both sides)

**PORTIA'S PLACE**, in Kingston (go there if you want to see polities, both sides)

**CHINA PLATE** in Kingston (go there if you want to see polities, both sides)

**PHO PHU QUOC** in Dickson, for the best Vietnamese food in Canberra

**LILOFANG** in Barton, a favourite Japanese restaurant

**MUSE**, in Kingston, a brunch cafe, wine bar and literary salon

**JOE'S** in Griffith, great newish restaurant and wine bar

**GRIFFITH VIETNAMESE**, hugely popular, especially with politicians; hand-written tributes on its wall by polities from Peter Slipper to Kevin Rudd

**WILD DUCK** on the Kingston foreshore, can be packed out when parliament in session

**PULP KITCHEN** in Ainslie for bistro food in a casual and comfortable environment

**VINCENT** in Barton, a new wine bar offering wine by the glass and good tapas



Clockwise from above: Ottoman; Waters Edge; XO's wine bar; Monster restaurant; and Monster executive chef Sean McConnell



Oysters are a surprising highlight for an inland city: "Our proximity to the south coast means we have the best oysters in the country," McConnell says.

Across town in Griffith, another of the *Weekend Australian Magazine's* Hot 50, Aubergine, is regularly named the ACT's best restaurant, and collects awards for its superb 500-label wine list, better than most in Sydney or Melbourne. Its Canberra-born chef, Ben Willis, is doing an extraordinary job, says McConnell: "Ben has defined fine dining here; and now he's doing the same with casual dining at Temporada (Willis's venue in the city centre)." Like Monster, Aubergine and Temporada pride themselves on their use of local produce, a practice fully embraced by paddock-to-plate practitioners such as Pialligo Estate's Farmhouse restaurant (see story, p28).

Monster and Aubergine would sit comfortably in any of Australia's big cities, indeed in any city in the world; but the reality is that Canberra's small population means it poses no immediate challenge to Sydney or Melbourne in the variety and quality of its restaurants. The challenge comes from the other direction, and it excites the city's top chefs.

"One of the great contributors to the improvement in Canberra's dining climate is the generous injection of youth into the public service and universities," McConnell says. "They come from Sydney or Melbourne, where expectations are higher. The new diners expect more, and it makes people pull their fingers out."

Some of those young food enthusiasts are taking



matters into their own hands, opening tiny restaurants anywhere they can, in shopping strips and less popular suburbs – “I love XO in Narrabundah,” says McConnell. Other players are drawn to areas like NewActon, where places such as A. Baker and the Parlour Wine Room embrace the laid-back vibe.

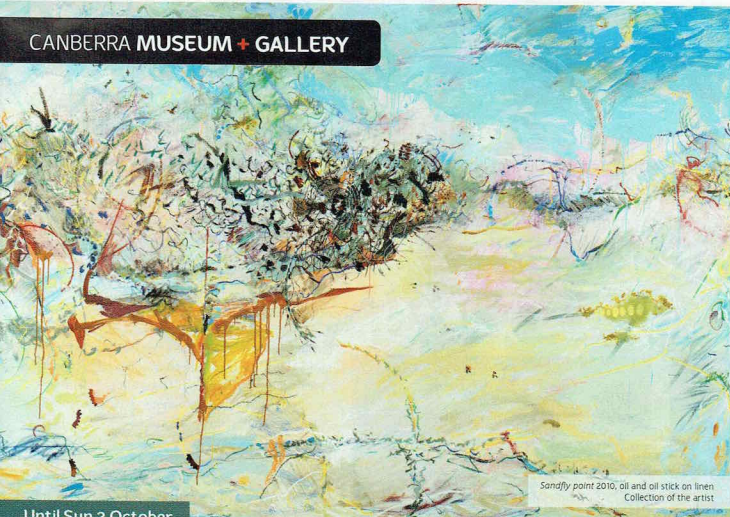
In Braddon, Eighty-six and Les Bistronomes are drawing new crowds; while old favourites of fine dining such as Braddon’s Italian and Sons, Ottoman in Barton and James Mussillon’s Courgette (in the city) and Waters Edge (on the lake in Parkes) continue to serve consistently award-winning food.

Of course it’s not just food that makes a great restaurant; a decent drop of wine doesn’t hurt, and here Canberra is particularly blessed. Taste the local Shiraz and Riesling, look at the picturesque wineries and it’s no wonder some politicians reach for a Cabcharge voucher and take off into the hills.

Indeed it’s hard for the business visitor not to be lured into Lerida Estate on the drive into town beside the lake, or to pop into Mount Majura, almost in the city itself, once you get there.

The Canberra District boasts 140 vineyards and almost three dozen wineries within 35 minutes of the capital, and many of them are now attracting attention from the wider world. The first grapes went

## CANBERRA MUSEUM + GALLERY



Sandfly, paint 2010, oil and oil stick on linen  
Collection of the artist

Until Sun 2 October

## Michael TAYLOR A SURVEY 1963–2016

This is the first major survey exhibition of the work of Michael Taylor, one of Australia’s best expressionist painters. The exhibition includes 41 paintings and 5 drawings, all sourced from major public and private collections throughout Australia.

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## *The Denmans*

Empire and Australia 1910–1917

Until Sun 13 November

This exhibition examines the political, cultural and imperial interests of the imposing power couple, Lord Thomas Denman, Australia’s fifth Governor-General and his wife, Lady Gertrude Denman.

## BIGGER ON THE INSIDE COLLECTING DR WHO

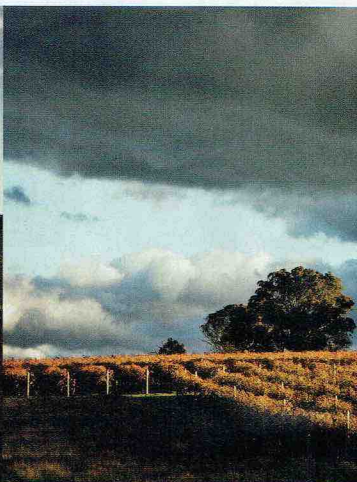
Until Sun 20 November

Timothy Kirsopp displays his entire collection of *Doctor Who* related memorabilia. Over 3000 items document everything Whovian from Daleks and the TARDIS to the Doctors and their companions.



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in around Yass in the 1840s, but production faded as other regions came into production. Canberra's wine business was reborn in the 1970s when scientists, many from the CSIRO, began planting small blocks of grapes.

There are wineries to suit all tastes and budgets, many with fine food and other delights – fancy snuffling out your own truffles? From the stars of international wine lists to tiny mum-and-dad operations, the Canberra District Wine website and VisitCanberra website give details of them all.

Ken and Judith Helm started their vineyard and winery in 1973 in Murrumbateman, just north of Canberra. Ken, the fourth-generation descendant of German vinedressers from the Rhineland, has seen huge change during his 43 years in the industry.

"It's amazing how the region has grown in that

The Canberra District boasts 140 vineyards and almost three dozen wineries within 35 minutes of the capital

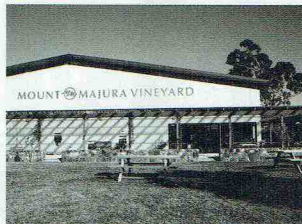
time," he says. "We have become one of the highest profile premium wine regions in Australia; that's not a biased view, but based on our dramatic sales growth."

As interstate awareness of the quality of Canberra wines grows, so does wine tourism, with visitors drawn not just to the capital but to smaller towns like Yass and Goulburn, with their history – Goulburn was proclaimed Australia's first inland city by Queen Victoria in 1863 – and country hospitality.

"We could do with even more restaurants and B&Bs, so we're lucky to have these towns on our doorstep," Helm says, pointing to the huge change in visitor demographics over recent years. "I would say 70 per cent of people now come from Sydney. The wineries are a very big drawcard for the whole region."

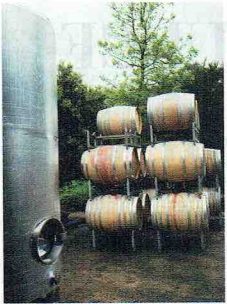
Much of the Canberra district's success can be attributed to the collegiate work of the wineries in promoting their own, and their colleagues', product. "We're only a fifth the size of the Hunter," Helm says, "so our competition is not among ourselves, but with the bigger regions. We fight as one."

Winemakers are quick to praise each other, encouraging experimentation with new varieties – Helm says he is currently enjoying the Austrian variety gruner veltliner made by Lark Hill – and following in the footsteps of those early scientists like Edgar Riek at his Lake George winery, and John Kirk, who established the celebrated Clonackilla at Murrumbateman.





Left: Clonakilla's winery and vineyards; below left, tastings at Mount Majura; and right, barrels at Lark Hill winery and one of their signature dishes



The Australian's James Halliday, the nation's elder statesman of wine writing and founder of Brokenwood Wines in the Hunter Valley and Coldstream Hills in the Yarra Valley, described those 1970s pioneers as the "PhD vignerons," and Helm says their academic background of collaborative research underpins the region's ability to work together. "It's one of the reasons we're doing so well, and why we're one of the few regions still planting grapes when others are pulling them out," he says.

As the land devoted to the grape increases, so will the wine region's profile on the international stage, limited only by the imagination of its people.

"I was always confident, all those years ago, that Canberra would be successful," says Helm. "But I must say this has exceeded my wildest dreams." □



# canberra's nature coast

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