



Often seen as the poor cousin of happening Hobart, Launceston is establishing its own cool credentials. With passionate locals producing some of the country's finest food and cold-climate wines, **Carli Ratcliff** suggests spending a gourmet weekend in the nearby Tamar Valley.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS CRERAR**



WINE
COUNTRY



Stillwater's 1830s timber building (left); Where's the beef? Black Cow Bistro's duck Maryland

FRI

HOBART has long been one of my favourite food places but in recent years the produce and wines of Launceston's Tamar Valley have begun turning up on

mainland restaurant menus. Keen to know what – and who – is behind the culinary drift up the highway, I'm here for a weekend in northern Tasmania.

I decide to make my base the heritage-listed Hatherley House, which was built in the 1830s. Australia's first major colonial-trained artist, Robert Dowling, once lived here. "When I saw this building, I thought, 'I could live in Launceston forever,'" says architect Jack Birrell, who bought the house with his wife, Rebecca, in 2010. Together they have transformed it into the city's leading boutique accommodation.

Discerning guests – often creative types – stay upstairs in suites that were the ballroom and kitchen in a previous life. Behind the house, two self-contained contemporary garden pavilions boast private verandahs and deep stone baths.

The main house plays host to the Birrells' art collection. The grand entrance showcases two large-scale works by Tasmanian painter Lindsay Broughton, a self-portrait by Brett Whiteley and an etching by Fred Williams. There's also an intriguing piece by local artist Simone Pfister, which sees intricate pencil drawings of lilies bound together to make an enormous paper dress. "We love living in Launceston," says Rebecca Birrell. "Tasmania has always been the unsung creative state."

SAT

After breakfast in my pavilion – the fridge is stocked with local yoghurt, muesli and stewed fruits – I go to meet another creative mind. Josef Chromy's eponymous wine estate is a 10-minute drive along Relbia Road. Once lush grazing land, the first hint of its reincarnation is a sign on the road reading Pinot Parade.

A white gravel driveway bordered by towering conifers leads to Chromy's cellar door. Walking through the Victorian garden, with the amber leaves of giant oak

trees crunching underfoot, I arrive at the property's original homestead. Inside is a cosy café and tasting station, while a sleek restaurant beckons beyond. With floor-to-ceiling windows framing a view of the estate's 61 hectares and some 160,000 vines (mostly pinot noir and chardonnay), it's one of the prettiest wine estates in Tasmania and the perfect place for an early lunch.

Chromy, now 84 and moving slowly due to a stroke a decade ago, remains one of the state's savviest businessmen. The one-time butcher's apprentice walks through the estate with me, recounting how he fled his homeland of Czechoslovakia during World War II and migrated to Australia when he was 19. "I used my last penny on a pair of shoes before boarding the ship," he says.

Chromy became one of Tasmania's great success stories, first with a meat wholesale business then cattle farms, abattoirs, a cold-storage transportation line and his export business, which introduced Tasmanian grass-fed beef to Japan.

When he moved into wine in 1994, Chromy bought the struggling, frost-affected



Otto guards the crop at Moore's Hill Estate (left); the Harvest market has highlighted top local produce since February 2012

Rochecombe and turned it into one of the state's most successful vineyards. Now called Bay of Fires, it produces the celebrated sparkling wine, House of Arras. He also developed the "fledgling vineyard" Jansz, Heemskerk and established Tamar Ridge.

But this estate is his favourite. "This is the best vineyard I have owned," he boasts as he hands me a glass of Josef Chromy 2014 Chardonnay. "And it'll be the last."

Back in town, the Harvest Launceston Community Farmers Market is winding down. Held in the centre of town every Saturday morning, the market only sells Tasmanian products – from locally harvested black truffles to ready-made stocks and sauces. By the end of my inspection, my bag is heavy with honeys and ciders pressed from windfall apples and pears, their glass jars and bottles clinking as I amble along.

Canadian-born Kim Seagram, who is president of the market, moved to Launceston in 1992. "Some of the best produce in the country and some of the best wines are here," she says. "We wanted to show the public what this part of Tasmania has."

With her husband, Rod Ascui, she's opened several restaurants, including the much-lauded Stillwater, regularly described as Launceston's best eatery. On the banks of the Tamar River, it's housed in the mill that once provided Launceston residents with flour, oats and even water.

The restaurant's warm interior retains many original features, including a bluestone cellar and exposed convict-laid brick walls.

The menu favours the Tamar and East Coast producers Seagram is so passionate about. Leaves and vegetables are grown by Yorktown Organics just 45 minutes up the road, oysters hail from Freycinet (an hour-and-a-half drive down the coast) and herbs including lemon verbena, sage and thyme are plucked from the garden out the back. "The producers who grow our food are like family," enthuses Seagram.

Some menu items are raised slightly further afield – saltgrass lamb from Flinders Island in the Tasman Sea; salmon and ocean trout from the Huon River near Hobart; and, rarely seen on menus, wallaby from the Midlands. Roasted and served with local

leaves, it's earthy and tender. "Only three people have a licence to shoot wallaby in Tasmania," says the affable waiter.

The accompanying wine – a glass of Holyman 2012 Pinot Noir – impresses as much as the wallaby. Inspired, I dedicate the afternoon to finding Joe Holyman, the bloke who made it. I discover that he has two labels, Stoney Rise and Holyman, which he makes on his vineyard near Gravelly Beach, a 20-minute drive north-west.

The road from the mill winds between vineyards, including Velo and Tamar Ridge, and the glistening Tamar River. I drive past the town's tiny marina and boat shed, into the village marked by a post office and a lone café. Just beyond, I find a sign pointing inland to Stoney Rise along Hendersons Lane.

There, a small building sits on the edge of a paddock with a serene view over vines and across the river to the hills beyond. Holyman, dressed in a pair of shorts and woolly socks minus his work boots, is inside at the cellar door.

He pours me a glass of pinot and we talk about life in the Valley. "When I left Tasmania



The Black Cow space was once a butchery (above); Saint John has some 150 beers on offer

to go university, I said I'd never come back," he recalls. Then 11 years ago, he and his wife Lou were on holidays and stopped at a vineyard. "I started talking to the bloke who owned it – he was keen to sell."

The Holymans now grow chardonnay and pinot noir grapes, producing about 3000 cases of wine each year under the Stoney Rise and Holyman labels. Their wines are on the list at Black Cow Bistro in the centre of town. Also owned by Seagram and Ascui (the pair seem to have a monopoly on fine dining in Launceston), the bistro's signature dish is steak from a handful of grass-fed-beef producers.

At Black Cow that night my pick is the 45-day-aged sirloin with Café de Paris butter, potato dauphinoise and a side of Dutch carrots. Soon followed by bed.

SUN

"Launceston is very quiet on a Sunday," Fran Austin of Delamere Vineyards tells me on the phone. She suggests I head out to Pipers Brook to visit her and her husband,

award-winning winemaker Shane Holloway.

Austin honed her craft at Jansz – and later Bay of Fires – before she and Holloway bought Delamere in 2007. Stone gates signal that I've arrived at the couple's property on Bridport Road. Driving slowly through what was once an orchard heavy with apples, pears and cherries, I come to a quaint wooden cellar door covered in vines.

Austin and Holloway greet me with a glass of Delamere Blanc de Blanc, an elegant sparkling from the 2008 vintage. As we walk around the property, hens and their downy chicks dart across our path. A gnarly artichoke bush is in flower over the fence and blackberries are doing their damndest to take over the garden. "Most of these vineyards were founded by 'weekend warriors', retired professionals keen to have a crack at winemaking," explains Holloway.

The scene is a lot different now. "The new generation of winemakers is here because they want to make interesting wines," he says. "Until now, Tasmania has largely been treated as one appellation. That's slowly changing."

Tasmanian beers are being defined by their geography, too. Saint John Craft Beer, in the centre of Launceston, opened last year and has an always-changing line-up of 12 beers and two ciders on tap. "We stock beers from all of Tasmania," says co-owner Ryan Campling. "Here in the Valley, we have a number of independent craft brewers – Little Rivers Brewing at Scotsdale, Morrison in town, Van Diemen and Seven Sheds."

At 4pm on Sunday the bar is full, as locals and visitors sample beers and enjoy live music. "We never imagined it would be as busy as it is," says Campling. "We've also been surprised at the enthusiasm for local product. The people who come here are truly interested in artisan beers and supporting locals." He grins. "That's Launceston." ●



STAY

Hatherley Birrell Collection

📍 43 High Street, Launceston

🌐 hatherley.com.au

TASTE

Josef Chromy Wines

📍 370 Relbia Road, Relbia

🌐 josefchromy.com.au

Delamere Vineyards

📍 4238 Bridport Road, Pipers Brook

🌐 delamerevineyards.com.au

Bay of Fires / House of Arras

📍 40 Baxters Road, Pipers River

🌐 bayoffireswines.com.au;

houseoffarras.com.au

Jansz

📍 1216B Pipers Brook Road,

Pipers Brook

🌐 jansz.com.au

Moore's Hill

📍 3343 West Tamar

Highway, Sidmouth

🌐 moreshill.com.au

Marion's Vineyard

📍 355 Deviot Road, Deviot

🌐 marionsvineyard.com

Stoney Rise and Holyman Wines

📍 96 Hendersons Lane, Gravelly Beach

🌐 stoneyrise.com

EAT

Stillwater

📍 2 Bridge Road, Launceston

🌐 stillwater.com.au

Black Cow Bistro

📍 70 George Street, Launceston

🌐 blackcowbistro.com.au

DRINK

Saint John Craft Beer

📍 133 St John Street, Launceston

🌐 saintjohncraftbeer.com.au

SAMPLE PRODUCE

Harvest Launceston

Community Farmers Market

📍 71 Cimitiere Street, Launceston

Saturdays 8.30am-12.30pm

🌐 harvestmarket.org.au



FLIGHT PATH

LST

QantasLink flies to Launceston from Melbourne, with connections from other Australian capital cities. qantas.com