

BROKE, New South Wales—Let’s dispense with the bad puns right now: The last time we visited Australia, we went for Broke.

No doubt unknown to most Americans, Broke is a village in the Hunter Valley, which provides or produces coal, milk, cheese, chocolate, wool, olives—but most of all grapes that go into making some of Australia’s best wines, including two that are widely available in the United States.

More often called “The Hunter” by Australians, the valley lies about three hours north of Sydney and is bounded by the Hunter River on the north and the Blue Mountains to the west. To the east is Newcastle (and the proverbial coals) and to the south a state forest and eventually Sydney. About twice the size of Centre County, it is home to boutique vineyards that sell privately as well as vineyards such as Rosemount and Lindemans, which are open for tastings seven days a week except most holidays.

My wife and I visited a friend’s vineyard near the village of Broke (settled in 1824) for two days in November. The couple grows a variety of grapes on their 80 acres, of which 50 are volcanic soil and the rest sandy loam. While they do sell grapes to Rosemount, they also have a private label.

The Hunter, to be sure, is more than just grapes. It is a destination, although not the first place North Americans think of. After all, it is not a city like Sydney or Perth or a resort area like Cairns where one goes to venture out to the Great Barrier Reef. (I’ve been to all three places.) Still, it has most of the same amenities, although accessibility for disabled tourists varies and needs to be confirmed in advance. Travelers have a wide choice in accommodations ranging from cottages to five-star hotels. They can give themselves over to a tour company as they go about tasting the wines

at the more than 120 wineries and cellar doors, some with galleries, others with restaurants. The names are a delight to see and read: Bimbadgen Estate, Mistletoe, Brokenwood, Brokenback (enough of the “Broke” puns), Hanging Tree, First Creek, Wattlebrook (which I kept calling Wattlebroke and to which the owner replied: “almost”), Poole’s Rock, Tulloch, Thalgara, Blueberry Hill, Golden Grape, Honeytree, Krinklewood, Piggs Peake, Tatler, Warraroong Estate, Margan Family, and my favorite, Thomas Wines.

Margan’s ended up as our choice for lunch. We first decided through tasting which wine we wanted to drink and then what we wanted to eat. To drink, we agreed on a verdelho, which we were told is not exported to the States. According to our host’s winemaker, “it has



classic verdelho flavours with an aromatic and fruity nose dominated by peach and lychee characters. On the palate it has broad peach and apricot flavours, balanced by a citrus finish.” Lunch was a series of



shared entrees rather than individual dishes. We sat inside to avoid the sun, but the semi-shaded deck attracted most of the diners while we were there. A month later, by the way, the temperature reached an unseasonable 133 degrees in the Hunter and the locals, according to our friend, hibernated like winter animals in their air-conditioned homes. Last year, the valley

endured a drought that slowed the ripening process and damaged some grapes beyond usefulness.

Although we drove about in a private car, the best option for serious tasters is to sign on to a tour and go by bus, preferably a mini so the group size is small and you have more elbow room. Australians are very serious about enforcing dwi, and with a .05 percent bac limit, it doesn't take much sipping to be legally drunk. In addition to police, Australians use cameras to snare speeders and red-light violators.

And be prepared for some out-of-character architecture in this bucolic land. One winery, Tempus Two, looks like a grounded space station and contains two restaurants—Japanese and Thai—and had a Japanese tour bus in the parking lot when we drove by.



Margan's was Mediterranean style, with some English food, and on our first day we ate in a stand-alone Italian restaurant.

The Hunter also has other attractions. On the two mornings we were there, our host drove us to a nearby field where wild kangaroos met for breakfast. As soon as they sensed humans—and we were easily 100 yards away—they froze and become almost undetectable because they seemed to be just another tree or stump. Using binoculars, my wife was able to see one mother with a baby in her pouch, a “joey” in the parlance of Australians. We also saw a dead kangaroo along the highway; some residents of the Hunter have “roo bars” on their cars much the way locomotives had cow catchers.



This land that is so good for grapes also provides abundant coal. Underground mining is big employer in the Hunter. Most of the miners live in the largest community in the Hunter, Cessnock, with a population of about 100,000. A friend of our friend's, a retired news agency owner back in Sydney, sold his house in December in the Hunter to a coal company for A\$500,000 (approximately \$388,000 at the time of our visit)

and was buying 50 acres with a waterfall near Devenport, Tasmania, where, coincidentally, we had just been a few days before going to Broke (no more puns, honest). New South Wales needs more coal-generated electricity, according to the state's energy minister, and the Hunter is a prime spot for developing yet another coal field. We could see the lights of a coal-mining operation from our friend's vineyard and we passed two collieries while touring about. High-powered electrical wires cross the valley.

Although coal mining was not something we expected to see, if there was one really surprising thing on this trip, it had to be the decline of corks in wine bottles. The Australians, because of a problem called "cork taint," are switching to—hold on to your corkscrews—screw caps, without apologies. Our friends proudly advertise having screw caps on their recent vintages, "ensuring perfect closure and easy refrigeration of an opened bottle for 'later'." Stories I retrieved electronically from Australian and U.S. newspapers suggest that the resistance to change from cork to screw caps exists in the United States, but is a non-issue in Australia and New Zealand. Given the increasing popularity of Australian wines in the States, resistance is futile. If you want proof, visit the Hunter. Go for Broke.

R. Thomas Berner is a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University. He lives in Santa Fe.