



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE An entrée at Vineyard Cottages & Café; the high altitude favours wine grapes; Peter Ingall hard at work at Beacon Forge; several hectares of garden give Vineyard Cottages privacy with charming views. FACING PAGE A pair of locals drop by for lunch at the Girraween Environmental Lodge.



Cool CHANGE

THERE'S A SMALL CORNER OF THE SUNSHINE STATE THAT
CONFOUNDS STEREOTYPES ABOUT QUEENSLAND'S
WEATHER AND LACK OF SERIOUS WINEMAKING.

WORDS **BARBARA SWEENEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **JARED FOWLER**





QUEENSLAND IS ALL about sun and sand, right? Clear, cloudless skies, sparkling blue water and pristine white beaches? Not quite. There is a very small pocket in the south-east called the Granite Belt that quite happily defies every stereotype you've ever held about the Sunshine State.

Lying on the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range west of Brisbane, the Granite Belt is an easy drive of about 2½ hours from the coast. At times more than 1000 metres above sea level, the road winds through the dramatic landscape of Cunningham's Gap up to the high country.

The New England Highway runs like a backbone through the region, from the town of Tenterfield just south of the NSW border to Warwick, about 115 kilometres to the north. It's a compact area and easily negotiable.

Centred around the town of Stanthorpe, population 5500, the region's history combines a range of pastoral pursuits, tin mining (the town's name derives from *stannum*, which is Latin for tin) and fruit growing.

Like the rest of the state, the drawcard is the climate — although here it's not about how hot it can get but how cold. In winter, the temperature often falls below zero at night and in summer, daytime temperatures rarely exceed 30°C.

While you don't go to the Granite Belt just for the weather, it does offer an alternative to the usual idea of Queensland's climate. For summer visitors it offers welcome relief from heat and humidity and in winter, what better excuse do you need than a nippy day to sit in front of an open fire with a mulled wine?

Past tourism initiatives did little more than exploit the fact that Stanthorpe was, to say the least, cool. But today it's the fruits of the climate that are proving the attraction.

Table grapes and almost the entire Queensland apple crop used to be the Granite Belt's claim to fame. But in the past 20 years increased plantings of wine grapes have seen the land use change dramatically. Orderly vineyards are now as much a feature of the landscape as the many netted orchards, winemakers having found success with the granite subsoil and the altitude. (The Felsberg Winery, for instance, at 900 metres above sea level, is one of the highest in Australia.)

Spending a weekend exploring more than 50 cellar doors is a very popular pursuit and has become more so with the launch >



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE
Ornate woodwork at the high-altitude Felsberg Winery; in the orchard at Sutton's Juice Factory & Cider; Vincenzo's is another nearby orchard; calzones baked by Sandra Miller; cooking tutor Geoff Metcalf. FACING PAGE
Granite country at Girraween National Park.



at the
Big Apple



WHERE TO EAT AND STAY

- **Azjure** This modern studio villa has bush views. 165 Sundown Road, Ballandean (07) 4684 1232.
- **Escape on Tully** A simple but stylishly decorated cottage that sleeps four. 934 Mount Tully Road, Stanthorpe. (07) 4683 7075.
- **Girraween Environmental Lodge** An eco-lodge in the bush near the Girraween National Park. Pyramids Road, Ballandean. (07) 4684 5138.
- **Mason Wines and Café** Enjoy the hospitality of Brandy and Jim Salmon (Jim's in the kitchen). 27850 New England Highway, Ballandean. (07) 4684 1341.
- **Shiraz Restaurant** The place for a special night out. 28200 New England Highway, Ballandean. (07) 4684 1000.
- **Vineyard Cottages & Café** The café offers one of the best dining experiences to be had. Cottages are set in a pretty garden. New England Highway, Ballandean. (07) 4684 1270.



of the Strange Bird trail, which charts the wineries and vineyards making wine from less familiar grape varieties such as tempranillo, durif, nebbiolo and mourvedre.

You might be forgiven for thinking the words ‘wine’ and ‘Queensland’ don’t belong in the same sentence and you’re not alone; Granite Belt winemakers are used to the look of disbelief on visitors’ faces. However, some decide to sidestep the issue altogether by simply choosing not to include the state’s name on their labels.

Visitors will find as many farm gates selling seasonal produce — not to mention chocolates and cheese — as wineries. Highlights include pick-your-own berries in summer and Sutton’s apple cider operation at Thulimbah.

With a history as a popular weekend destination, the Granite Belt has a host of self-catering accommodation, making it the kind of place where ‘staying in’ has huge appeal.

Although the twice-monthly Stanthorpe farmers’ market has recently closed, specialties such as Sandra Miller’s homemade basil pesto can be found in other local outlets. And if you don’t feel like shopping and cooking, why not make a feast of it and enlist the assistance of chef Geoff Metcalf who runs cooking classes for groups as small as four from his kitchen at Glen Aplin?

Such widespread indulgence needs a moderating influence and this is the perfect time to take a post-prandial walk among the granite boulders and rocky outcrops of the Sundown and Girraween national parks.

So next time you’re packing for a Queensland holiday, defy the stereotype and pop mittens, and a scarf, in with the bikini. *
For more information about the Granite Belt, telephone 1800 762 665 or visit www.granitebeltwinecountry.com.au

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

- **Ballandean Estate Wines** One of the area’s first wineries, Ballandean has a cellar door, a food shop and a café. 354 Sundown Road, Ballandean. (07) 4684 1226.
- **Bramble Patch** Fresh berries from November to March. Townsends Road, Glen Aplin. (07) 4683 4205.
- **Geoff Metcalfe’s cooking classes** Geoff will design a class to suit. You’ll see his New England Larder products in food shops around the region. Limberlost Road, Glen Aplin. (07) 4683 4183.
- **Heavenly Chocolates** *Heavenly... need we say more?* 2117 Pyramids Road, Girraween. (07) 4684 5121.
- **Jamworks** After Devonshire tea, and great jam, watch **Beacon Forge** recycle old metal into new art. 7 Townsends Road, Glen Aplin. (07) 4683 4171.
- **Owen’s Bush Bakery** Old-fashioned cakes include apple turnovers, neenish and custard tarts. 23 Maryland Street, Stanthorpe. (07) 4681 1457.
- **Sutton’s Juice Factory & Cidery Juice**, vinegar and cider; David and Ros Sutton make it all. 10 Halloran Drive, Thulimbah. (07) 4685 2464.

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT More of Girraween bushland; Sandra Miller collects basil for her homemade pesto; strawberry pickers hard at work; cakes from Owen’s Bush Bakery. **FACING PAGE** A bush-surrounded cottage at Girraween Environmental Lodge.



