

Spring

primavera style

words genine howard || photography genine and rowan howard

EACH YEAR IN SPRINGTIME, THE GRANITE BELT BECOMES LIKE A RIPE GRAPE BURSTING ON A VINE, READY TO BE PICKED AND SAMPLED. GENINE HOWARD HEADED OUT WEST TO QUEENSLAND'S APPLE AND GRAPE CAPITAL TO SAMPLE THE REGION'S FINEST FOOD AND WINE, AND DISCOVERED THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING.



Primavera (Italian for spring or spring style) in Stanthorpe, the region's capital, is a time when the area shrugs off its winter chill – the weather is pleasant, the apple orchards are adorned with soft pink and white blossoms – and for winemakers, this is the time of year they release their new vintages. If that wasn't enough of an excuse to make the four-hour drive to the Granite Belt, Primavera is also the time when locals get together to celebrate springtime with a multitude of gastronomic and cultural events.

My husband Rowan and I happily accepted an invitation to join the celebrations for the launch of the spring season, and we certainly did it in Primavera style.

The drive down the D'Aguiar Highway to the Granite Belt is by no means a boring trek. Our journey took us through magical countryside, past the glistening expanses of Wivenhoe Dam, down winding country lanes and past acres of farming land. Having only lived on the Sunshine Coast for a couple of years, my husband and I were virgins to the Granite Belt, but we were keen to become acquainted with its locals – namely food and wine.

As we neared the area, we scoured our tourist paraphernalia to find some of the region's hidden gems. Deciding to take the 'Armistic Way', we ended up at a delightful café called Giardino (Sicilian for 'little farm'). With views over one of the most established produce farms in the region – Eagles Produce – this was certainly no little farm. You can even take a 'seed to salad' tour of the farm onboard the colourful old school bus affectionately known as The Shed.

“
Wine improves
with age. The
older I get – the
better I like it.
”

The menu at Giardino is overflowing with fresh ingredients from the farm – including ripe tomatoes, crisp lettuces and greens, carrots and capsicums. Restaurant owner Chris Swordy and his charming wife Kristy suggested the aranchini balls (cheese stuffed risotto balls) and crispy squid salad brimming with soft fetta, which we gorged over a local verdelho. Little did we know that we were soon to meet the winemaker behind our lunchtime tippie – Robert Channon Wines.

As we pulled up in the car park, we heard the unmistakable sound of a choir emanating from one of the wine sheds ... yes; a full-fledged concert was in progress! Being music-buffs, we were drawn to the angelic sounds resonating from the tin shed and promptly ran into the winery's owner and winemaker, Mr Robert Channon himself, busy ejecting a naughty Burmese cat from the concert. Robert informed us that the inquisitive cat was interrupting proceedings by leaping on the piano mid-song and putting the choir off. We were ushered into the shed to listen while the troublesome cat was delivered back to the farmhouse.

We later found out that the entire Channon family (cat included) musically-inclined, and such concerts were a regular treat for locals and tourists. The angelic voices in this instance belonged to the Canticum Chamber Choir from Brisbane. Robert, back from stowing said cat and followed by resident hounds Salami and Bella, informed us that he was once a high profile Brisbane lawyer whose love of wine drew him to the region. His wines are now regarded as some of the most sophisticated in Queensland, earning



GRANITE BELT WINES ARE BECOMING RENOWNED ACROSS AUSTRALIA



GIARDINO CAFE

him multiple accolades and a nod from renowned wine critic James Halliday, for his verdelhos.

After sampling an array of Robert's finest and patting the miniature horses, we tucked a couple of award-winning bottles under our arms and set off to our next stop.

Ravens Croft Wines is on what is termed the 'strange bird' trail – a trail of wineries offering more unusual grape varieties. Ravens Croft's contributions include a petit verdot and gewurztraminer, a delightful wine with hints of rosewater and Turkish Delight – delicious.

Mark Ravenscroft moved to the Granite Belt some 10 years ago, and in that time has cemented himself as a key winemaker. Having studied in South Africa and worked in some of Australia's renowned wine regions including the Margaret River and Hunter Valley, Mark always knew he wanted to produce his own label. Now with his very own cellar door and successful wine label, he has gained respect and notoriety in his field – and in our fridge!

After squabbling over who would be designated driver for the rest of the day, we thought it best to head to our accommodation for the weekend, Cypress Ridge Cottages. Located in Ballandean, 20 minutes south of Stanthorpe, the pretty cottages provided a perfect setting for our spring escape. It turns out that owner Shannon Cox and I both lived in the tiny tourist town of Port Douglas and even worked for the same company! Shannon and her family have created a haven for weary (some wine-weary) travellers to enjoy in between indulging in the region's produce.

Our own indulgence continued that night at the aptly named Shiraz Restaurant in Ballandean. Owner and chef John Rogers and wife Jenny have run the Girraween Environmental Lodge for several years and have recently developed this gem of a restaurant. Newly renovated (with wine bar to come), impressive food and substantial local wine menu make this quaint Queenslander-style restaurant a must-do if staying in Ballandean.

As if we hadn't eaten enough, the next morning was kick-started with a full country breakfast hamper at Cypress Ridge Cottages followed by a delightful coffee and chat with local Jamworks owner, Sue Ingall over a cup of freshly brewed coffee on the verandah at her charming store. We discovered her jams are 'made with love' after many years of developing her grandmother's recipes. Next stop was Mount Stirling Olives located a crow's fly around the bend and over the bridge from Jamworks.

We were greeted at the olive farm by owner and now olive-guru, Jim Miller. Jim used to regularly visit Mt Stirling with his wife Vivienne to purchase olives and wine. Just like that razor bloke, he liked the product so much he bought the company. Jim entertained Rowan and I with the ins and outs of olive production, marination and packaging (while sampling the wares) and introduced us to his fudge store – with all fudge made fresh onsite. Mount Stirling is well worth the visit for both olive fanatics and those with a sweeter tooth, and if the fudge or the olives don't impress, the 15 or so resident goats may.

Suitably stuffed like one of Jim's olives, we gathered our parcels brimming with jams, wine, fudge, wine, olives and more wine and embarked on our journey home. And with a multitude of Granite Belt wines to drink now, and a few to cellar and drink later, Rowan and I will continue to enjoy the region for some time.

Which reminds me of one of my favourite sayings; "wine improves with age – the older I get, the better I like it." ■



FRIENDLY FACE AT MT STIRLING OLIVES



SPRING TIME BLOSSOMS



FRESH PRODUCE GROWN LOCALLY



FOODIES' DELIGHT

WIN

One lucky profile magazine reader will be given the opportunity to experience the Granite Belt region, staying at Cypress Ridge Cottages. Indulge in a 'foodies' weekend visiting wineries and sampling the local fare. Then you can return to your secluded cottage getaway in a bushland setting for some well-earned rest and relaxation.

The prize, 'Long Weekender Package', is a weekend away (two nights) for two adults staying in a Pioneer Cottage. The package includes a gourmet breakfast hamper daily and late check out.

For more information on Cypress Ridge Cottages, visit their website www.cypressridgecottages.com.au

To enter this amazing competition, head to www.profilemag.com.au for entry details.

CONTACTS ...

- Giardino Café, 212 Bapouame Road, Amiens 4683 3351
- Robert Channon Wines, Amiens Road / Bradley Lane, Amiens 4683 3260
- Raven's Croft Wines, 274 Spring Creek Road, Stanthorpe 4683 3252
- Cypress Ridge Cottages, 2357Eukey Road, Ballandean 4684 1100
- Jamworks, Corner New England Hwy and Townsend Road, Glen Aplin 4683 4171
- Mount Stirling Olives, Collins Road, Glen Aplin 4683 4270

EVENTS ...

- Shakespeare Under the Stars @ Bungawarra Wines October 9 to 11
- Brass and Wine @ Robert Channon Wines October 8
- Primavera Spanish Twilight Tapas @ Summit Estate October 24
- Nude Food at Brisbane Good Food and Wine Show November 6 to 8
- Granite Belt Flavours at South Bank November 15

LOCATION ...

The Granite Belt is located a four-hour drive from the Sunshine Coast and is accessible via the D'Aguilar Highway. www.granitebeltwinecountry.com.au