



# Guides for Good

by Dani Valent

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## Spirit still strong down in the valleys

Hit hard by recent events, the King and Ovens valleys have so much to offer.

Time has become very strange. When we planned this story, in the haze of the bushfires in early January, we were thinking in terms of a slow but hopeful recovery of infrastructure, bank balances and spirit.

No one thought it was going to be quick or easy. Nor did anyone predict that Australia's bushfire-affected businesses would tentatively emerge into sweet autumn sunshine before tumbling headlong into the effects of a pandemic. January seems so long ago and late March doesn't seem the greatest time for travel stories.

It's less than two weeks since I took my four-day jaunt around the King and Ovens valleys in north-east Victoria's High Country. Our world has changed fast since then.

While I was driving around, the mornings were fresh, the afternoon sun gleamed, the deciduous trees of Bright shivered their way towards famous autumn reds, and news of COVID-19 blanketed my road-trip radio. I hopped out of the car to eat, look, learn and talk. Conversation steered between fires (the big known) and the virus (the big unknown).

By the time I got to Bright and my Friday night dinner at Reed & Co Distillery – thanks for the five gins, barman Adam – it had just been announced that the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival was cancelled. I felt like there was a big roller door closing on normal life and I needed to get back home to scramble underneath it before my life was shuttered and unutterably different.

So, in a spirit of nostalgia and anticipation, and with many ideas for online buying, I bring you Victoria's beautiful King and Ovens valleys. Trips to this region – just off the Hume and easily accessible from Sydney and Melbourne – are going to be amazingly sweet when we're out the other side of this bewildering new normal.

### Chrismont Winery

Owner Arnie Pizzini was in the midst of harvest when I visited. Red wine production was limited due to bushfire smoke taint but Chrismont's bright La Zona Prosecco was looking great. Lunch on the huge deck might mean beef carpaccio with fig dressing, or risotto with duck and pork terrine. There's a Tuscan-style guesthouse on site. Meantime, there's free delivery on wine.

● 251 Upper King River Road, Cheshunt, [shop.chrismont.com.au/Buy-Wine](http://shop.chrismont.com.au/Buy-Wine)

### Pizzini

The King Valley was once dominated by tobacco farms, and



the infrastructure here has been charmingly repurposed by the Pizzini family. An old kiln is now given over to a "Pop and Fizz" experience, a guided prosecco tasting that shows the Italian sparkling in different glassware and against various snacks to unpack its qualities in a fun and innovative way. Buy a gift card for the experience now, buy prosecco online and start experimenting with matches such as popcorn and blue cheese.

● 175 King Valley Road, Whitfield, [pizzini.com.au/collections/shop](http://pizzini.com.au/collections/shop)

### Dal Zotto

As well as offering on-site bocce, wine tastings and trattoria lunches, Dal Zotto rents e-bikes to make your jaunts along Prosecco Road easy and breezy. Cycling around the King Valley may come later. Meantime, buy a starter pack of wine and imagine the wind in your hair.

● 4861 Wangaratta-Whitfield Road, Whitfield, [dalzotto.com.au/shop](http://dalzotto.com.au/shop)

### La Cantina

Sometime blacksmith, cane cutter, tobacco farmer and now wine-maker, Gino Corsini has seen a lot in his 86 years. His cellar door is in



a charming stone cottage and there's nothing like listening to his pride and enthusiasm when he discusses, for example, saperavi, a gentle, complex red that loves to strut its stuff alongside T-bone steak. You can buy Gino's wine online.

● 54 Honey's Lane, King Valley, [lacantinakingvalley.com.au](http://lacantinakingvalley.com.au)

### Hurdle Creek Still

Simon Brooke-Taylor turned a farm shed into a rustic gin distillery, using local grain to produce the base alcohol and flavouring it with regional botanicals, including juniper from down the road and red gum leaves from outside the door. It's possible to slake a sailor's thirst via online shopping.

● 216 Whorouly-Bobinawarrah Road, Milawa, [hurdlecreekstill.com.au](http://hurdlecreekstill.com.au)

### Walkabout Apiaries

The Whitehead family produces honey and mead, a fermented beverage made from honey and water. It's a delight to taste different products in their onsite shop, but you can also buy online. I recommend the classic dry mead.

● 1531 Snow Road, Milawa, [walkaboutapiaries.com.au](http://walkaboutapiaries.com.au). Also see [winesofthekingvalley.com.au/bushfire-support-for-local-produce](http://winesofthekingvalley.com.au/bushfire-support-for-local-produce) available online, including fabulous finds at The Olive Shop.

### Lancemore Milawa

Rooms at this peaceful hotel back onto Brown Brothers vines and the accommodation is generous and comfortable. It's a popular base for everyone from wiry cyclists to relaxed retirees. The onsite restaurant uses regional produce in accomplished mod-Euro meals.

● 223 Milawa-Bobinawarrah Road, Milawa, [lancemore.com.au/milawa](http://lancemore.com.au/milawa)

### Milawa Mustards

Jim and Kristy Mellor hadn't long opened their new store in an old butcher shop before fires flared nearby. Their plans have taken a big hit but the mustard is still nose-tinglingly brilliant. The Mellors grow mustard seeds themselves. Call to arrange a mustard delivery.

● 62 Milawa-Bobinawarrah Road, Milawa, [milawamustards.com.au](http://milawamustards.com.au)

### Tolpuddle Cheese

You know what's great about goats? They refuse to worry about pandemics so we can count on them to be as cheeky as ever and to continue producing milk to turn into Tolpuddle cheese. Put Donovan and Melissa Jacka's farmgate on your must-visit list

Clockwise from main: the stunning view to Mount Beauty; the bar at Reed & Co Distillery in Bright; pumpkins farmed for their seeds at Pepo Farms; and Donovan Jacka with a goat at Tolpuddle Cheese  
Photos: Dani Valent, supplied

and keep an eye on regional farmers' markets and restaurants for their lovely curd.

● 70 Rusholme Road, Tarrawingee, [tolpuddle.com.au](http://tolpuddle.com.au)

### Coffee Chakra

There's heaps happening in Myrtleford, including Coffee Chakra, which combines coffee roasting, fantastic curries and brilliant cakes under one welcoming roof. Finding coffee hard to come by? Call to ask about shipping. Next door, Tu Vietnamese Street Food is teaching the town about rice-paper rolls and noodle salads.

● 105 Myrtle Street, Myrtleford, [coffee-chakra.business.site](http://coffee-chakra.business.site)

### Billy Button

Just up the road, winemaker Jo Marsh recently opened a cellar door to showcase her Billy Button brand, as well as other local labels. When I visited, she was about 10 months pregnant and about to drive to the Grampians to pick up grapes because all the local vineyards were smoke-tainted. Help a gal out and buy some wine.

● 161 Myrtle Street, Myrtleford, [billybuttonwines.com.au](http://billybuttonwines.com.au)

### Pepo Farms

I love this place – it's built on passion and community-minded ethics. Sharan and Jay Rivett farm pumpkins and sunflowers for their seeds in a field across the road from their shop and education centre. They sell seeds for snacking plus press them into oil and use the residue for flour. Everything is available online.

● 5061 Great Alpine Road, Ovens, [pepofarms.com.au](http://pepofarms.com.au)

### Reed & Co Distillery

Reed is both restaurant and gin distillery. I sat at the kitchen counter and watched my food being cooked over fire – memories of the pumpkin with burnt honey and goat's curd will see me through any lockdown. I also did some very serious investigation of their flagship Remedy gin. They ship – why not start your own inquiry?

● 15 Wills Street, Bright, [reedandcodistillery.com/shop](http://reedandcodistillery.com/shop)

### Templar Lodge

Pledge to head beyond Bright, over the gap towards Mount Beauty, where chef Emma Handley has turned an old Masonic lodge into a gorgeous restaurant. In warm weather, the grape-vine-sheltered verandah is pure poetry. Inside, it's cosy and warm. Emma's chestnut gnocchi, and peanut butter parfait are Templar musts.

● 181-183 Kiewa Valley Highway, Tawonga, [templarlodge.com.au](http://templarlodge.com.au)

