



REINVENTING RUTHERGLEN

Vintage with a modern twist in a wine heartland

GEORGIE JAMES

LIBBY MOFFET

Strike up a conversation with Rutherglen locals and chances are you'll soon hear two words that capture the spirit of innovation sweeping through the historic Victorian wine region: Mount Ophir.

For decades, residents of the town have brought a flat Australian drawl to the title of the sprawling 19th-century Rutherglen wine estate, fondly calling it "Mount Oaf-er". But in recent years, the property's new owners — Eliza, Angela and Nick Brown, fourth-generation siblings from Australia's formidable Brown Brothers wine dynasty — have cast back to the winery's French-infused history, referring to their estate as "Mount O-fear".

While the new accent draws wry smiles among some of Rutherglen's older residents ("I just call it Mount O," declares one), no one in this small northeast Victorian town is laughing about the changes the energetic Brown trio are overseeing at the estate, which last produced wine in 1955. Rather, locals are full of admiration for the way the family has already transformed the 56ha estate's historic buildings into stylish boutique accommodation.

The reinvention of Mount Ophir reflects an exciting sense of renewal evident throughout Rutherglen and its wineries, renowned for decades for their formidable fortified wines and big durifs. Family clans are strong in this area, which in 1890 accounted for about a third of Australia's wine production. Names such as Campbell, Morris, Chambers and Jones have been entwined in the district's vineyard trellises for close to a century or more. But now there's a new generation — of which, refreshingly, many are women — bringing a different flavour to the region's offering.

Originally from nearby Milawa, the Brown siblings purchased Mount Ophir in 2016, making it the third Rutherglen property in their collection, which already included All Saints Estate and St Leonards Vineyard. Clearly not ones to shirk from a challenge, the trio and their families spent weekends renovating the estate's character-packed buildings to create six different lodgings, ranging from the petite Winemakers Cottage, just right for two, to the generous Pickers Cottage sleeping 20.

Without question, the jewel in the crown is the French provincial style Tower, built by London wine merchant family the Burgoyne in a tribute to their French heritage after they bought Mount Ophir from the original owners



Mount Ophir Estate, main; chic lodgings in the Tower, above right; siblings Mandy and Arthur Jones at Jones Winery and Vineyard, left; Scion winemaker Rowly Milhinch, below

in 1903. For decades, the circular, three-storey building served as an office, but now, renovated and furnished in chic whites, blacks and greys, the Tower is clearly all about pleasure. On the ground floor, a glittering crystal chandelier hangs over a round marble dining table, while a small fridge is stocked with free temptations, including gourmet cheeses and sparkling wine. Venture up a narrow spiral staircase to the sitting room and you'll find well stacked bookshelves and a comfortable lounge, the perfect spot to enjoy bucolic views over the estate.

On the top level, there's a wonderfully calm bedroom with a queen-size bed dressed in grey and sage linens and a small marble bathroom. It's a magical transformation, although not without its challenges according to the charismatic Eliza Brown, who laughingly relates how she had to wrestle the lounge through the building's first-floor window from her brother's forklift.

Accommodation complete, the siblings are



now working on a makeover of the grounds and the all-important task of winemaking, with Mount Ophir on schedule to release its first vintage in more than 60 years in 2021.

In the meantime there's plenty of exciting drops to be enjoyed elsewhere across Rutherglen's 19 wineries. West of Mount Ophir, at Scion Vineyard & Winery, Rowly Milhinch — the great-great-grandson of George Francis Morris, who founded Morris Wines in 1859 — is focused on the juxtaposition of Rutherglen old and new. Rowly, who turned his talents to winemaking 16 years ago after graduating in design, grows his own grapes and handcrafts the wines at his small winery, where a contemporary cellar door and a Tesla charger sit beside stately grey box gums and an old homestead.

"We provide a modern spin on what's been growing here forever," Rowly says, as he pours a glass of stunningly smooth, dry rose created from an early pick of his durif grapes. It's hard to move on, but before we know it he's introducing us to his Blonde, a wonderfully aromatic wine made from white muscat. And then there's Fortrose, a deliciously drinkable durif Rowly describes as a "leg in through the side door to introduce people to new Rutherglen".

On Rutherglen's east side, affable Mandy Jones and her brother Arthur are building on more than 90 years of winemaking pedigree to introduce some new offerings at their boutique Jones Winery and Vineyard, established in 1860 and bought by their grandfather, Les Jones Snr, in 1927. A knock-out is Correll, an inviting aperitif with hints of orange and spice that instantly makes you want to settle in for an afternoon with good friends. And then



there's the memorable LJ, a rich red made from the oldest vines in Rutherglen, planted at the winery in 1905.

Having spent 12 years making wines in Bordeaux and with a diploma in cordon bleu cooking, Mandy has brought a French flair not only to Jones's handcrafted wines but also the winery's charming restaurant, where award-winning chef Briony Bradford delivers a seasonal menu featuring local produce and delights such as muscat and carrot cake. It's a much sought-after dining spot for visitors and locals, who also rate the relaxed Pickled Sisters Cafe at Cofield Wines as a must-do for brunch and lunch.

In this tightly knit community, Mandy Jones and Eliza Brown are good friends (the two irreverently refer to each other as Jonesy and Brownie) and share a passion for Rutherglen's future. Mandy's vision includes the creation of one of the district's latest tourist offerings, the Gourmet Amble Experience, a self-guided 5km saunter that takes visitors on a progressive lunch across Rutherglen, enjoying food from Jones Winery.

You can walk, drive or hire a bike for the amble, which makes its first stop at Anderson Winery, run by Howard Anderson and his daughter Christobelle. Howard grins broadly as he tells me he can't be called a local as he's only lived in Rutherglen for 30 years. Nonetheless he can lay claim to producing Rutherglen's first sparkling wines, and his bubbling shiraz proves a great companion to a charcuterie plate entree. Then it's off to Jones for a main course with matched wine, before heading back to town to enjoy a picnic dessert and muscat beside the landmark Big Wine Bottle.

While the 36m-tall bottle is a star on Instagram, the prettiest sight in Rutherglen has to be its Main Street, featuring brick shopfronts and iron lacework veranda railings dating back to the 1860s when the gold rush swelled the town's population to 20,000, almost 10 times its present size. But don't let the sleepy facades fool you; there are some interesting changes happening behind those historic Main Street doors. At James & Co, local Georgie James and her winemaker husband Ricky have converted a former store into a relaxed cellar door where clusters of lounge chairs and high tables provide a convivial setting to enjoy their wines, including their best-selling sparkling sangiovese rose.

Just a block away, the Brown family is again demonstrating its flair for hospitality at Thousand Pound Wine Bar & Store, which showcases more than 140 wines from the region and beyond. It's a stylish small bar that's hitting the spot not only with visitors to the town, but also locals, equally excited by the taste of change in Rutherglen.

Libby Moffet was a guest of Tourism North East.

■ tourismnortheast.com.au

IN THE KNOW

Accommodation at Mount Ophir Estate starts from \$160 a night in The Winemakers Cottage; from \$550 a night in The Tower. The Rutherglen Gourmet Amble costs \$75 a person.

■ mountophirestate.com.au
■ explorerutherglen.com.au
■ scionvineyard.com
■ joneswinery.com.au
■ andersonwinery.com.au
■ jamesandcowines.com.au
■ thousandpound.com.au