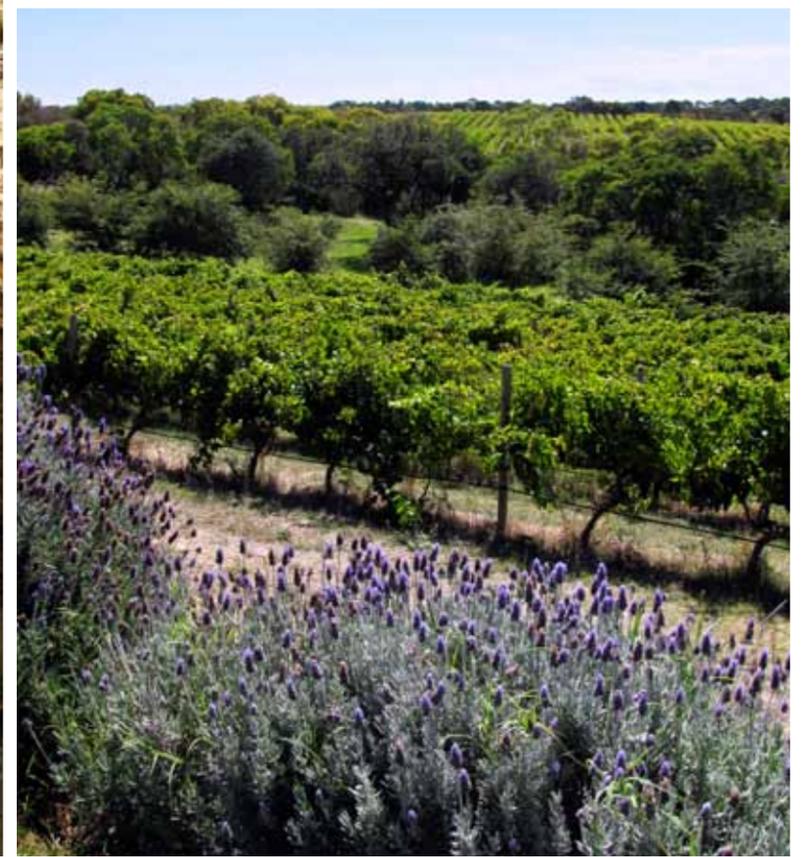




# Luxury & Limestone



Ben Connor explores South Australia's Limestone Coast and discovers the many powers of this miraculous stone.



I'm standing in a biodynamic vegetable patch on a verdant hill surrounded by vineyards. Sunflowers bloom on its periphery, their happy yellow faces proudly advertising the garden's fertility, which I'm learning could be down to the horn of a lactating cow.

According to biodynamic theory, "the horn is a conduit between the spiritual, or cosmic, realm and the Earth," Derek Hooper, co-director of Cape Jaffa Wines, explains.

"A cow is supposed to process that cosmic energy," he says, and lactating cows in particular are considered more attuned to these forces. So cow horns are filled with manure and buried in the soil, tips upward, for six months. Manure is then added to water, stirred into a vortex and spread onto the garden. Believe in them or not," declares Derek, "these concepts invoke passion, and get you more involved in the agricultural process."

They also seem to work. In the 17 years since its

first vineyards were planted, Cape Jaffa Wines – now a certified biodynamic winery – has established a reputation for exceptional wines that showcase the qualities of the area's terra rossa (red soil), free-draining limestone and proximity to the ocean.

A combination of physical beauty, earthy spirituality, mouth-watering tastes and an exposé on the unique attributes of limestone, Cape Jaffa Wines is a fantastic introduction to South Australia's Limestone Coast.

The family-run winery in Cape Jaffa's Mount Benson wine region is a four-hour drive south of Adelaide along the beautiful coastal stretch of Coorong National Park – a string of shallow lagoons 100-odd kilometres long that's a haven for birdlife.

Established by Derek's parents Kym and Sue in 1993, Cape Jaffa vineyard has always been run on biodynamic principles. A holistic approach to farming,

biodynamic agriculture emphasises the use of natural alternatives to pesticides and fertilisers, and timing viticultural activities to accord with phases of the moon, as well as other practices, such as the use of lactating cows' horns to summon cosmic energy. The impressive cabernet sauvignon, shiraz, merlot, semillon, pinot gris and sauvignon blanc that result can be experienced, accompanied by the local cheese platter of your choice, at a stone-and-timber cellar door overlooking the vines.

The moon, it turns out, also significantly affects the lives of South Australia's famous southern rock lobster. Andrew Lawrie started fishing for lobster with his dad when he was a kid. In 1997 he opened Sky Seafoods, a live lobster export company based in Robe that now exports to China, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea and Japan.

"Activity in all areas seems to improve at the full moon," he says. "They tend to be on the march for food. And the

sea lice don't work so hard – with more moonlight, they're less active and don't eat the bait."

Visitors to Sky Seafoods can view lobsters displayed in tanks according to their size, which range from 600 grams to 2.5 kilograms and more. You can purchase them and any of the company's other domestically distributed seafood goods from the shopfront. I leave Sky Seafoods with a platter of southern rock lobster, king prawns, oysters and tartare sauce, and devour it all on a narrow pine tree-lined park overlooking the Southern Ocean. The flesh of Robe's rock lobster is white, crisp and sweet: qualities that make this region's lobster some of the very best in the world and largely attributable to the area's pristine, chilly waters.

Robe, 20 minutes' south of Cape Jaffa Wines, has been a popular holiday spot for Adelaide residents since the 1850s. The town is regularly inundated with visitors and has hosted its fair share of weddings: I count five on ☛

**Above, from left:** The Limestone Coast has a dramatic area of sea cliffs; sunflowers at Cape Jaffa Wines; biodynamic farming works wonders at Cape Jaffa vineyard.



**FAST FACT**  
The Limestone Coast was formed over 26 million years, 25 million of those under the sea being sculpted by the force of tectonic plates.



**Clockwise from top left:** Wine barrels at Cape Jaffa Wines; Robe features many interesting buildings, such as the town's Customs House; the Limestone Coast's famous big lobster, located in Kingston.

the weekend of my visit. It's not difficult to see why. Historic sandstone buildings line commercial Victoria Street, their occupants offering a smorgasbord of wine tastings, deli goods, galleries, clothing and quality café, restaurant and pub fare. Beautifully tended flower gardens, many in sectioned oak barrels, dot the street and brighten alfresco seating areas.

There are several picturesque lakes to the town's south, as well as a golf course and a state-of-the-art marina. But the town's L-shaped coastline is perhaps its finest asset: fine white-sand beaches embrace pristine waters with a milky aqua sheen, an effect of run-off from the limestone, while at Cape Dombey cliffs plummet to the ocean from a moonscape-like limestone plateau.

About 110 kilometres inland, amid rows of sauvignon blanc vines, Wayne Stehbens grabs three or four grapes, pops them in his mouth and chews. Seconds later, with a sound like the call of a prehistoric bird, he spits out the seeds, gesturing to me to do the same. It's what Stehbens,

multi award-winning senior winemaker at Coonawarra's Katnook Estate, calls "the chew and spit technique".

Officially dubbed berry sensory analysis, the process has four components: visual and tactile assessment and the successive tasting of the grape pulp, skin and seed. Juicy pulp, he explains, is ripe and should be picked soon while gelatinous pulp is a sign of immaturity. We repeat the process, spitting grape seeds into our hands and analysing them. When a seed is "colouring up", Stehbens tells us, that's another sign of maturity. Chewing the seed, however, I can taste a hint of bitterness, indicating that the grapes are not quite ready to be picked. They will be ready next week, he says.

The Limestone Coast's Coonawarra area, founded by John Riddoch in the 1880s, is one of Australia's most famous wine-producing regions. Like the wines of neighbouring Mount Benson, this region's wines have a distinctive quality. It's derived from a unique mix of factors: being grown in a thin layer of terra rossa soil over limestone, fed pure underground water, and given a long, cool ripening season. Terra rossa, a type of sandy clay formed from the weathering of limestone, produces aromatic wine varietals with soft tannins.

The region's star performer is cabernet sauvignon, and Katnook Estate's Odyssey Cabernet Sauvignon, available for tasting at its 19th-century limestone cellar door, is regularly touted as the region's finest. Equally impressive is the family-run Zema Estate, where a plummy 2006 oak-matured merlot dazzles my nose, palate, body and soul.

Penola, right in the heart of the Coonawarra, is famous for its historic buildings, artistic community and as the birthplace of the work of Saint Mary Mackillop. Comfortably seated in the beautifully appointed Pipers of Penola, however, my tastebuds are my only interest. A star culinary performance ensues: wagyu carpaccio with radially placed dollops of truffled aioli leads to roast lamb rump with hummus, braised eggplant, capsicum, chickpeas and cherry tomato salsa, climaxing with a burlesque chocolate 'terra rossa' tart.

Dining at Pipers of Penola was a fortune denied to my



**Above, left and below:** Sunset over West Beach in Robe; *Thylacoleo carnifex* remains displayed in the Naracoorte Caves complex; Katnook Estate Cellar Door.

next subject – *Thylacoleo carnifex*, the largest marsupial carnivore to have existed. Its 500,000-year-old remains show a short femur, indicating that the Limestone Coast resident was slow and heavy, a significant impediment for any non-human predator. According to Frank Bromley, my gregarious guide through Naracoorte Caves, the megamarsupial's retractable claws, perfect for climbing trees, suggest it may have been the original drop-bear.

Thylacoleo's remains, along with thousands of other ancient specimens, were discovered in the network of interconnecting limestone chambers and galleries known as Naracoorte Caves, around 40 kilometres north of the Coonawarra region, back in 1969.

The Naracoorte Fossil Mammal Site, now inscribed on the World Heritage list, is filled with extraordinary limestone formations and unmoved fossil remains – the likely story of which is succinctly explained and evocatively dramatised in a simulated forest at Wonambi Fossil Centre, where artist Steve Hayter's recreations of Australia's now-extinct megafauna might have inspired George Lucas.

In the surrounding area are bushwalks, campgrounds, bat tours, adventure-caving sites and unexpectedly tasty cuisine at Caves Café – all of which makes Naracoorte Cave National Park, like much of the Limestone Coast, a decidedly moreish adventure playground. 🍷

# Fact File

## HOW TO GET THERE

Rex Airlines flies regularly to Adelaide and Mount Gambier, 50 kilometres south of Coonawarra; phone 13 17 13.

## WHERE TO STAY

- Robe Lakeview Motel and Apartments**  
2 Lakeside Terrace, corner Tobruk Avenue, Robe  
08 8768 2100 [www.robelaqueviewmotel.com.au](http://www.robelaqueviewmotel.com.au)
- Alexander Cameron Motel & Apartments**  
23 Church Street, Penola  
08 8737 2200 [www.alexandercameronmotel.com.au](http://www.alexandercameronmotel.com.au)

## WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

- Sky Seafoods**  
58 Robe Street, Robe  
08 8768 2899 [www.skyseafood.com.au](http://www.skyseafood.com.au)
- Pipers of Penola**  
58 Riddoch Street, Penola  
08 8737 3999 [www.pipersofpenola.com.au](http://www.pipersofpenola.com.au)

## FARM DOORS

- Cape Jaffa Wines Limestone Coast Road, Mount Benson via Robe 08 8768 5053 [www.capejaffawines.com](http://www.capejaffawines.com)
- Katnook Estate** (and Riddoch) Riddoch Highway, Coonawarra 08 8737 0300 [www.katnookestate.com.au](http://www.katnookestate.com.au)
- Zema Estate** Riddoch Highway, Coonawarra 08 8736 3219 [www.zema.com.au](http://www.zema.com.au)
- Rymill Coonawarra** Corner Clayfield Road and Riddoch Highway, Coonawarra 08 8736 5001 [www.rymill.com.au](http://www.rymill.com.au)

## MORE INFORMATION

[www.southernaustralia.com](http://www.southernaustralia.com)



Image courtesy of Katnook Estate [www.katnookestate.com.au](http://www.katnookestate.com.au)

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