

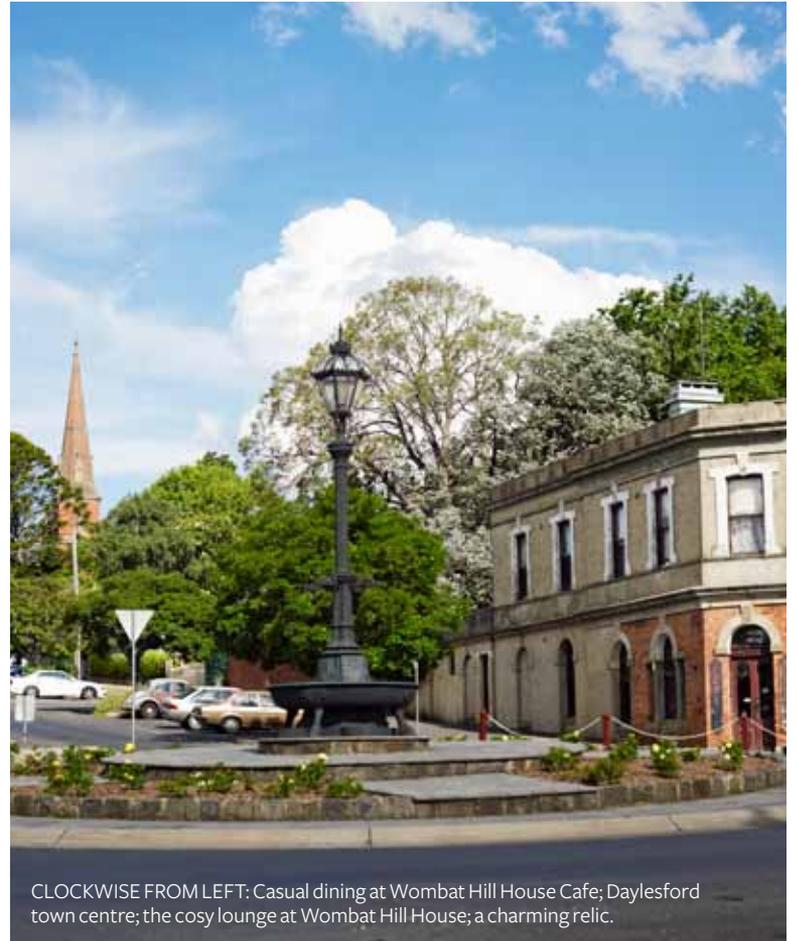
Four cheese, potato and fried
sage pizza (recipe on p226).
Aura napkin. Carafe from
Manon Bis.



Country STRONG

Despite its humble beginnings, today the historic Victorian town of Daylesford is an indulgent escape. Locals **Alla and Larissa Wolf-Tasker** reveal the riches of the region.

BY FAITH CAMPBELL
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARK ROPER
STYLED BY AMBER MACKAY
FOOD AND RECIPES BY ALLA WOLF-TASKER



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Casual dining at Wombat Hill House Cafe; Daylesford town centre; the cosy lounge at Wombat Hill House; a charming relic.



THERE'S A MOMENT ON THE 90-MINUTE DRIVE from Melbourne to Daylesford, as the landscape shifts from industrial cityscape to rolling hills and towering gums, when the allure of the destination begins to draw you in. Then, just as quickly as the trees thicken and crowd the roadside, they recede to reveal the weatherboard cottages, nurtured gardens and quiet streets of an idyllic country town. Settled by gold prospectors and Swiss-Italian immigrants in the mid-1800s, Daylesford's working-class origins and cultural diversity laid the foundations for today's thoroughly urbane pursuits: a robust foodie community, inviting boutique accommodation and an abundance of spas that take advantage of the region's famed mineral springs. "Despite its closeness to Melbourne, when you visit Daylesford you feel a world away," says Alla Wolf-Tasker, owner (with husband, artist Allan Wolf-Tasker) of iconic local hotel, Lake House, as well as executive chef at its Good Food Guide two-hatted restaurant and her latest endeavor, Wombat Hill House Cafe.

A revered and indefatigable *bon vivant*, Alla's ties to the region run deep, "My parents bought a run-down miner's cottage on Wombat Hill in the '60s, so I spent most of my childhood summers here." These sentiments are echoed by her daughter, Larissa, who has her own heady memories of a youth spent "horse riding, catching yabbies and trying to sell bunches of wildflowers to passing motorists". Now, working alongside her parents in a role she describes as covering everything from "food and wine, hotels, styling, brand management and psychology", the younger Wolf-Tasker shares her mother's vigorous work ethic and philosophy of "just trying to make people happy".

Their latest project sees the pair apply this ethos to great effect. In contrast to the fine-dining at Lake House, Wombat Hill House (03-4373 0099), set high on a hill in the botanical gardens inside a revamped '40s cottage, offers more relaxed fare. "The food is deliberately simple, but we use the same local suppliers that we have for many years at Lake House," says Alla of the laidback menu.



The warming pumpkin curry.
Fork from Manon Bis.
Aura napkins.

PUMPKIN, CHICKPEA AND COCONUT CURRY Serves 4

- | | |
|---|---|
| 2 tbsp vegetable oil | 1 tsp turmeric |
| 3-4cm piece of ginger, peeled and finely sliced | 1 x 400g can chopped tomatoes |
| 4 garlic cloves, finely sliced | 2 x 400ml cans coconut milk |
| 1 red chilli, de-seeded and finely sliced, | 1 x 900g pumpkin peeled and chopped |
| plus extra for garnish | in 2-3cm cubes |
| 4 shallots, finely sliced | 2 x 400g cans chickpeas |
| 1 tsp mustard seeds | 1 cup plain yoghurt |
| 15-20 curry leaves | steamed rice and lime wedges, to serve |
| 1 bunch coriander, leaves picked, stalks chopped | |

Heat oil in a large saucepan. Add ginger, garlic, chilli and shallots, then reduce heat to medium and cook until golden, stirring occasionally. Add the mustard seeds, curry leaves and coriander stalks and fry until the curry leaves are crisp. Add turmeric, tomatoes and coconut milk and bring to the boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 5-8 minutes. Add the chopped pumpkin, cover with a lid and cook on a low heat until the pumpkin is just cooked through (about 20-25 minutes). If the mixture is reducing too quickly, add a splash of water. Once the pumpkin is cooked, remove it from the pan and reduce the sauce for 15 minutes or until it thickens. Return pumpkin to the pan. Add the chickpeas and heat through, being careful not to over-cook. **To serve** Divide among bowls of rice and top with yoghurt; scatter with coriander leaves and finely sliced red chilli. Garnish with lime wedges.

“The seasons are strongly felt here and each one brings its own enchantment.”

—ALLA WOLF-TASKER

Describing their entertaining style as “casual and impromptu”, the Wolf-Taskers are regularly found at their newest eatery, greeting sightseers, foodie fanatics and devoted locals alike. Communal tables, comfortable wing-backed chairs and a thriving kitchen garden lend the space a homely atmosphere. As she adds the finishing touches to her pumpkin curry, Alla sums up what she loves about the town. “In many ways it’s the perfect village, one that people dream of. I’m five minutes from a great cup of coffee, can go mushrooming in a hushed forest or grab a drink in a quirky bar,” she muses. It’s this mix of country and cosmopolitan that continues to draw city folk looking for a change of pace.

With all that Daylesford and the surrounding region offers, it’s still the simplest moments, those that recall her bucolic childhood, that entrance Larissa. “On my morning walks I see kangaroos, wombats and wild hare, and at the moment the trail to Tipperary is full of pale yellow butterflies. It’s heaven.” ■



Mother and daughter Alla and Larissa in front of Allan Wolf-Tasker’s mural, that covers one wall at Wombat Hill House Cafe. Hair and make-up: Karissa McLaren



Kazuki’s at the Raglan

Where to eat & drink

Kazuki’s at the Raglan

Offering a unique, Japanese-inspired twist to the region’s famed yield, this welcoming space is equal parts fine-dining and family restaurant. Housed inside a grand 19th-century property, Kazuki’s exemplifies the mix of old and new Daylesford.

1 Camp Street, Daylesford; 03-5348 1218

Farmers Arms Hotel

The oldest pub in Daylesford, stop by for a drink and chat with the locals. Set in an historic red brick building, the modern menu is diverse and changes regularly to take advantage of local, seasonal produce.

1 East Street, Daylesford; 03-5348 2091

Horvat’s Wine Bar

For those looking to let their hair down, Horvat’s is a combination bar, cellar door and live music venue, featuring two bands each night, Friday through Sunday. With cosy booths, excellent local wines and a relaxed vibe, add this hole-in-the-wall to your Daylesford bucket list.

6 Howe Street, Daylesford; 03-5348 2333

Cliffy’s Emporium

A cafe, wine bar and grocer in one, this is a must-visit for the gourmand. Stocking pickles, preserves and organic produce, Cliffy’s is committed to supporting local providers. Packed to the rafters inside a rustic weatherboard store, the gorgeous interior is as eclectic as its wares.

30 Raglan Street, Daylesford; 03-5348 3279



The Retreat at Lake House

Where to stay

The Retreat

A five-star home away from home, The Retreat is a private residence belonging to the Lake House hotel. Separate from other guest rooms, this unique option lets you access the luxuries and services of the award-winning hotel, in the seclusion of a two-bedroom house. Explore the grounds with a walk around Daylesford Lake and into the Wombat State Forest, indulge in a degustation meal or treat yourself at the acclaimed mineral spa. An icon not to be missed.

From \$1,454 per night. 4 King Street, Daylesford; 03-5348 3329

The White House

This beautifully updated 1850s house offers stand-alone accommodation perfect for a getaway with friends. Curl up in the library or whip up your own epicurean delights in the modern kitchen. An easy walk into the centre of town, The White House is ideal for those looking for a boutique alternative to the usual hotel experience.

From \$380 per couple per night. 58 Albert Street, Daylesford; 0416 032 111

Hepburn at Hepburn

A 10-minute drive from Daylesford and a short walk from the acclaimed Hepburn Bathhouse and Spa, this secluded spot suits those looking for a complete escape. Luxury villas, created by interior designer David Hicks, offer modern comfort in a peaceful bushland setting.

From \$400 per night. 2-8 Range Road, Hepburn Springs; 03-5348 1194



A selection of treasures at Junk Style Vintage

What to see

Junk Style

An Aladdin's cave of vintage clothing, home wares and bric-a-brac, while away the hours in this jam-packed emporium. Run by a collective of local businesswomen, the mix of personalities is reflected in the eclectic inventory. Larissa, who stops by regularly, says, "Who doesn't like finding a bargain? Especially if it's a beautiful white dress or chunky turquoise necklace..."

Upstairs, 67 Vincent Street, Daylesford; 03-5348 2277

Lavandula Swiss Italian Farm

Find yourself transported from Daylesford to the lavender fields of Italy. An enduring example of the region's migrant settlers, this charming farm features original 1860s stone buildings set amongst the lavender, olive groves and vineyard. La Trattoria cafe serves European-influenced fare and the range of lavender products, including honey and hand cream, make gorgeous mementos.

350 Hepburn-Newstead Road, Shepherds Flat; 03-5476 4393

Made Gallery

Curated by Daylesford local Jo Ruchel, Made features regular exhibitions by regional and national artists. High on Larissa's list of local hot spots, she describes the gallery as "a space that is always evolving and where you can find something extra special to remind you of your weekend away. I often fog up the windows peering in on my morning walk!"

1 Camp Street, Daylesford; 0437 687 942

FOUR CHEESE, POTATO AND FRIED SAGE PIZZA

Makes 2, serves 4 (pictured on p222)

"Daylesford has at least 70 varieties of potatoes, so we have to celebrate that!" —Alla Wolf-Tasker

2 good-quality, store-bought pizza bases
2 tbsp olive oil, extra for drizzling
4 garlic cloves, crushed
150g crumbled ricotta
100g goat's cheese

100g grated good-quality mozzarella
100g Parmigiano Reggiano
4 large peeled potatoes, parboiled and finely sliced
1 dozen sage leaves, fried in hot oil until crisp

Preheat oven to 220°C. Heat two pizza stones or grease two baking trays. Place pizza bases on trays and brush each with 1 tablespoon of oil and the crushed garlic. Combine ricotta and goat's cheese in a bowl. Crumble the cheese mix over pizza bases and top with half of the mozzarella. Season with salt and freshly ground pepper and drizzle with 1 tablespoon of oil. Arrange the potato slices on top of the cheeses and drizzle with olive oil, to taste. Scatter with grated parmesan and the remaining mozzarella cheese and bake for 15 minutes, or until pizzas are browned and the base is crisp. **To serve** Scatter with fried sage leaves, season to taste with salt and pepper and drizzle with a little more oil.

FLOURLESS ORANGE CAKES

(Makes 12)

“We make tempting sweets for the display counter at Wombat Hill. These cakes are perfect when enjoyed with a coffee or, better still, a cup of our very special creamy hot chocolate. Who could say no?” —Alla Wolf-Tasker

**4 oranges to make 350g
orange puree**
8 large eggs
400g sugar
1 tsp vanilla essence

310g ground almonds
15g baking powder
**whipped cream, Turkish
delight and ground
pistachios, to garnish**

For the orange puree Place well-washed oranges in a pot and cover with water. Bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook for 4 hours until the fruit is soft and disintegrating. Place oranges in a food processor, and blitz to a smooth puree. **For the cakes** Preheat oven to 165°C. Whisk eggs and sugar until ribbons form. Combine egg and sugar mix with the orange puree and vanilla essence. Stir in the ground almonds and baking powder, ensuring an even mixture. Spoon mix into greased dariole moulds and bake for 14 minutes or until a skewer inserted into centre of the cakes comes out clean. Leave to cool completely. **To serve** Garnish with whipped cream, Turkish delight and ground pistachios. Un-iced cakes can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

