

epic



Wombat Hill House

**Where** Wombat Hill Botanic Gardens, Central Springs Road, Daylesford, 4373 0099  
**Prices** Breakfasts, \$7-\$17; lunches, \$12-\$18; sweets, \$11  
**Cards** MC V Eftpos  
**Licensed**  
**Open** Thurs-Mon, 9am-4pm; Fri-Sun, 5-8pm  
**Website** wombathillhouse.com.au  
**Wheelchair** Access and disabled toilet  
**Cuisine** Cafe

PICTURE: EDDIE JIM



Back to the garden

**W**OMBAT Hill House is the Wolf-Taskers' latest venture and it's nothing short of amazing.

Its setting is lush, a cafe burrowed in 1860s botanic gardens on the rim of an extinct volcano — often mist-shrouded — with grassy expanses, conifers and arching elms. "I don't think I'd ever be a good street shop-front sort of person," Alla Wolf-Tasker says.

Tons of cash, energy and love have been funnelled into this cafe, with an underlying desire to create something from nothing and to help reinvigorate the gardens. The decrepit 1940s caretaker's cottage, full of rats and possums, was gutted and re-engineered and is now an incredibly smart space.

Herb and veggie plots bloom out back — the spoils appear in the day's dishes — and there's a sheltered outdoor nook facing the grassy slope. Inside, high-backed chairs cluster invitingly around the fireplace and shelves hold cookbooks, gardening guides and Alla's new produce line (*A Wolf in the Kitchen*).

Allan Wolf-Tasker painted the winged wombat mural, its whimsy tapping into the folklore surrounding the ancient volcano. Wombat exists because of Alla's



Nina Rousseau

connection with the gardens: "I spent so much time up there as a kid with my mum, and Larissa with her grandmother, and it has a special place in my heart."

Her parents, postwar Russian migrants and "consummate cooks", were avid gardeners, with a smoke-house and an illegal still. "My mother was probably the original prolific forager. I can't remember ever going for a walk with my mother where she didn't come back with a handful of stuff," Alla says, adding that her childhood was a "continuous shared table".

Wombat's menu has a similar easy, all-occasions feel. There are ciabatta rolls full of pulled Western Plains

pork with Asian slaw and a bit of chilli, a classic Reuben, and salads, such as tuna tossed with capers and cornichons, butter lettuce from the garden, radish, olives and a soft-boiled egg. Grazing plates (warm bread included) can be compiled and taken away to eat as a picnic.

For "first thing" (until noon) there's brioche french toast — two thick slices, not too eggy — with poached fruit, a dollop of creamy Meredith yoghurt, O'Toole's honey and sweet, nutty clusters of walnut crumble. The breakfast pizza — it says "for one" but two could easily share — is laden with fried eggs, cheddar and mushroom, or there are baked eggs with white beans and Istra chorizo.

The whole thing screams "day trip". Welcome to the Lake House of the cheap eats' world.

■ YOU may also like ... **Cliffy's Emporium** 30 Raglan Street, Daylesford, 5348 3279.

Home-style food and local produce for sale.

**Apple Annie's Bakery Cafe** 31 Templeton Street, Castlemaine, 5472 5311.

Golden, flaky custard danishes hot from the oven, buttery quiches and fab pies.

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