

Sunday lunch: Wombat Hill House, Daylesford

October 1, 2011



Cosy ... Wombat Hill House.

DAFFODILS are bobbing in the breeze as we follow a winding path through Daylesford's Wombat Hill Botanical Gardens, which are flush with spring.

We are on our way to the new Wombat Hill House — a garden, cafe and store, opened recently by Alla Wolf-Tasker of Lake House.

Step inside what was once a derelict caretaker's cottage from the 1940s and it doesn't take long to see the Wolf-Tasker stamp all over it.

There's a cosy fireplace and couches with plump cushions, shelves of goodies from the A Wolf in the Kitchen produce range and wooden tables and chairs.

The smell of Wolf-Tasker's enticing food greets you but taking centre stage is her husband Allan's playful wall painting depicting the garden's lofty Pioneers Lookout Tower, the nearby Convent and a very cute fat, furry wombat with wings.

Outside, red geraniums spill from tubs, bunches of bay leaves hang from the pergola and small rosemary pot plants sit atop tables that overlook beds of spring blooms and flourishing herb and vegetable plots.

At a bar, you can sit and while away the hours.

The gardens have a sentimental attachment to the Wolf-Tasker family; their daughter, Larissa, was often entertained by her grandmother here with enchanting stories and games.

We start lunch with a Wolf and Cub Chardonnay 2010 (\$9 a glass) and a Bloody Mary, horseradish and celery drink (\$14) while we peruse the menu, which has an emphasis on local and organic produce.

Meatballs and mash (\$16), chilli-crumbed three-cheese macaroni bake (\$14), pumpkin, chickpea and coconut curry, rice, yoghurt and relish (\$16) and a duck pastie with chickpea and spinach salad (\$16) are shared and taste delicious in the spring sunshine.

A memorable sticky pear and caramel pudding (\$11) and great coffee are a fitting finale as we watch the passing parade. Some drop by for takeaways and provisions for their picnics and pantries.

The cafe has a whimsical touch, with wombat replicas perched in birdcages and a display on the back wall of old equipment rescued from the overgrown gardens.

After lunch, we wander through the 10.4-hectare gardens designed in the 1860s by Baron Ferdinand Von Mueller of Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens fame. Sitting on top of an extinct volcano, where soils are lush, it is home to giant conifers and elm trees.

Climb the Pioneers Lookout Tower and you will be rewarded with panoramic views of the area.

Reviewed by Sue Wallace