

#BENDIGO #CREATIVECITY

# Slice of heaven

In Central Victoria, Bendigo has been designated a UNESCO Creative City and, along with its surroundings, a globally important Region of Gastronomy. The area certainly deserves the accolade. *By Helen Hayes*

IT WOULD BE RUDE NOT TO TAKE A nibble of what is widely touted as Australia's best vanilla slice. I discovered this custardy, crispy, melty morsel in the tiny town of Bridgewater, not far from Bendigo. It used to be a place you passed through on the way to somewhere else. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it destination 180 kilometres northwest of Melbourne in Central Victoria. But not anymore. Pat O'Toole bought an old 1872 pub and turned it into the Bridgewater Bakehouse. He heard about a competition to determine the country's tastiest vanilla slice, and in 2017, decided to enter. He won in 2018. In 2019, he won again. There was no judging in 2020, so O'Toole is the reigning champion to this day.

People started to file into Bridgewater to see what all the fuss was about. Today, O'Toole sells 500 of the dreamy slices a day. The Bakehouse is not the only good thing in town. The gorgeous Art Deco-style Bridgewater Hotel has received a garden makeover in recent months, and is a stylish place for lunch or a drink followed by a stroll along the new Loddon River Walk.





## A GOOD VINTAGE

More goodness awaits a few minutes northwest in Inglewood, a town with one foot still in its gold rush heyday. It is a living, breathing film set, with history taking centre stage in vintage shops lining the main street. Fusspots, Sharps Bazaar and Inglewood Emporium are full to the brim with a treasure trove of covetable objects. If you don't find a curio to take home, you're not looking hard enough.

It's a similar story around 70 kilometres south in Castlemaine, where the enormous – almost dauntingly so – Vintage Bazaar has aisles of pre-loved treasures. Meanwhile, Platform No. 5 next door is stocked with beautiful Japanese antiques and a collection of retro kimonos. Both are part of The Mill precinct, an 1875 wool mill reborn as a food and shopping hub. There are 43 businesses on site, including Das Kaffeehaus, a glorious Viennese coffee house that transports you to the Ringstrasse with culinary treats like strudel and schnitzel.

Next stop is Shedshaker Brewing, established by Hunters and Collectors drummer Doug Falconer. Try the Human Frailty Pale Ale – a nod to the band's album of the same name. And then fromagerie Long Paddock Cheese, where French cheesemonger Ivan Larcher hand-makes produce using organic cow's milk, and today leads courses for the public to do the same at his on-site Cheese School.

Some 60 kilometres west, the Farmers Markets transform the historic mining town of Talbot on the third Sunday of every month. It's another treasure seeker's heaven, with several blocks of stalls and shops selling everything from quirky tea cosies individually made for particular teapots at the Corridor Gallery, to local wines at TalbotProvidore and Eatery, not to mention hay bales sold directly from the back of a truck.



## SIP AND SAVOUR

Not far out of Bendigo, the Heathcote Wine Region unites dramatic cellar-door architecture with extremely drinkable vintages. Peregrine Ridge sits pretty in a striking glass-walled building on a ridge overlooking a lush valley.

Here, we sip a moreish 2013 American oak shiraz and fruity sparkling shiraz that takes 10 years to make. Next up is Silver Spoon Estate, a boutique cellar door that is totally off grid. It is fully solar-powered, and vines are dry grown, minus irrigation, hand-pruned then hand-picked. It's quite the hit, with facilities recently extended for the fourth time – a new cellar door opens in July.

Vinea Marson is a family affair, with Mario, Helen and their children making wines that channel their Italian heritage. Enjoy a tasting – the orange-hued Friulano #7 is particularly interesting – accompanied by cured meats and cheeses. Just 10 minutes from Bendigo's city centre is the region's oldest working winery, Balgownie Estate. It's a place you'll want to linger – good thing you can check in to glamping tents or contemporary rooms in the Hermitage, then forget about the need to drive while you sip wines in the cellar door or on-site restaurant.

My bell tent is toasty and warm, and my comfy queen-size bed awaits. Before sleep takes me, I reflect on the many amazing experiences I've had in the Bendigo region. Especially that vanilla slice. A gastronomic delight? Absolutely. 🍷



## NICE TO KNOW

In the Goldfields region of Victoria, the city of Bendigo has been recognised by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network as a City of Gastronomy, along with 245 other creative cities around the world. This title recognises Bendigo's diverse food culture and the community's commitment to sustainable, local, delicious and creative produce.



## BENDIGO

OPENING SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Shopping along Bendigo's Chancery Lane @ Bendigo Regional Tourism; old-school Bendigo trams @ Visit Victoria; Bridgewater Bakehouse's vanilla slice; TalbotProvidore and Eatery. THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Silver Spoon Estate @ Graham Hosking; Das Kaffeehaus in Castlemaine @ Michelle Jarni; treats in the same cafe @ Michelle Jarni; Bendigo Art Gallery @ Emily Godfrey/Visit Victoria; glamping at Balgownie Estate. ICON: Ibrandify/The Noun Project



## TRAVEL FACTS

### GETTING THERE

Qantas flies to Bendigo from Sydney twice daily. [qantas.com.au](https://www.qantas.com.au)  
You can catch the train from Melbourne to Bendigo. It is a two-hour trip.

### STAYING THERE

Balgownie Estate Bendigo Glamping [balgownieestatebendigo.com](https://www.balgownieestatebendigo.com)  
Mercure Bendigo Schaller Hotel [all.accor.com](https://www.all.accor.com)

### WINE

Peregrine Ridge [peregrineridge.com.au](https://www.peregrineridge.com.au)  
Vinea Marson [vineamarson.com](https://www.vineamarson.com)  
Silver Spoon Estate [silverspoonestate.com.au](https://www.silverspoonestate.com.au)

### FOOD

Bridgewater Bakehouse [bridgewaterbakehouse.com.au](https://www.bridgewaterbakehouse.com.au)  
Masons of Bendigo [masonsofbendigo.com.au](https://www.masonsofbendigo.com.au)  
The Woodhouse [thewoodhouse.com.au](https://www.thewoodhouse.com.au)  
Das Kaffeehaus [coffeebasics.com](https://www.coffeebasics.com)  
TalbotProvidore [talbotprovedore.com.au](https://www.talbotprovedore.com.au)

### SHOP

Inglewood [inglewood.vic.au](https://www.inglewood.vic.au)  
Talbot Farmers Market [talbotfarmersmarket.org.au](https://www.talbotfarmersmarket.org.au)  
The Mill [millcastlemaine.com.au](https://www.millcastlemaine.com.au)

### INFORMATION

Bendigo Regional Tourism [bendigoregion.com.au](https://www.bendigoregion.com.au)  
Bendigo and Region Gastronomy Guide [bendigogastronomy.com.au](https://www.bendigogastronomy.com.au)