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Art, food and wine combine effortlessly at this charming estate

Only 50 years after wine arrived in the region, Mornington Peninsula has 200 wineries, 50 of which have cellar doors. But Pt. Leo Estate is the only one with a large-scale sculpture garden.

By ELIZABETH MERYMENT

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5 MINUTE READ

You've brought the weather with you," says everyone to us on this big blue-sky day on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. "We've had terrible weather. This is more like Sydney weather."

Is it? Well maybe when Sydney is at her shiny coastal best, it could be. But standing on what feels like the edge of the continent, facing outwards to Phillip Island with the salty Antarctic air on our faces, we feel a long way from home.

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Perhaps this sense of foreignness comes from the fact we are wandering such a unique piece of the Peninsula. For Pt. Leo Estate is not just a magnificent winery situated on a piece of the coast with views to forever. It is also studded, improbably, with 60 large-scale sculptures.

It's almost discombobulating to tour this 133ha property, laced with graceful chardonnay, pinot gris, pinot noir and shiraz grapes, while admiring the cool and quirky work of some of the world's best sculptors. A giant KAWS cartoon bronze to consider over your wine, madam? Well why not?

Pt. Leo Estate is the passion project of Melbourne's billionaire Gandel family, who have spent a good few decades creating this modern tourism masterpiece.

You have to admire their dedication. Until the 1960s, the estate was a sheep station, and wine was only a minor industry in the area until the 1970s when vigneron started moving in with ambitions of reproducing in this Antipodean landscape the luscious cold-climate wines of France. Only 50 years later, the Peninsula has 200 wineries, 50 of which have cellar doors. But Pt. Leo Estate is the only one with a large-scale sculpture garden.

We're here on a Sunday for lunch at Laura, the estate's fine dining restaurant helmed by Spanish-born culinary director Josep Espuga. And the estate is pumping. Adjacent to Laura is Pt. Leo Restaurant, a contemporary brasserie where dishes are predominantly cooked on a wood-fired grill (think grilled snapper bathed in Pt. Leo Estate Sparkling beurre blanc, or charcoal-cooked "drunken" chicken with corn, sugarloaf cabbage and raspberries). It's packed, and Laura is full too, even accounting for the 10-course seasonal menu costing \$275 and the four-course signature menu \$165.

Laura has the pick of the positions, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the sculpture garden, the vines and the sea, and it's a leisurely, luxe dining experience with morsels rolling out of the kitchen like jewels. You might receive, say, snow crab with Royal Blue potato, Oscietra caviar and bouillabaisse (a petite, gorgeous dish of

five-star flavours), or a smoked Skipton eel pot sticker dumpling with karkalla, local flowers and dashi (which is adventurous and fun). If you're lucky, they'll have southern rock lobster on the menu, served at the table by chef Espuga himself, an exercise in indulgence if you don't mind the \$85 supplement.

It would be enough to travel here for this restaurant, but one of the real pleasures is spending time in the sculpture garden in a postprandial stroll. Sculpture can be an acquired taste but there should be something for everyone here, with works by George Rickey, Tony Cragg, Robert Klippel, Inge King, Boaz Vaadia, Tomokazu Matsuyama, Barry Flanagan, Henry Moore and Bert Flugelman, and new pieces by Manuel Merida and Dmitriy Grek. A favourite of many is Spanish sculptor Jaume Plensa's mesmerising 3D face, Laura, after which the restaurant is named.

We take our fill of art and food and retreat for the night to Cassis Red Hill, a suite of villas 8km down the road. Nestled beside Eldridge Estate, a small, lovely winery with 3ha of vines producing chardonnay, pinot noir and sparkling wine, Cassis Red Hill is the perfect retreat for a wine-focused weekend.

From our verandah, which has views that reach to the sea, as well as a glorious aspect over the vineyard, we settle in for an exquisite sunset accompanied by glasses of the wine we've brought from Pt. Leo. Our villa, called The Lodge, is luxurious and contemporary with rustic French provincial accents. Its windows onto the vineyards make us feel at one with the lush, gorgeous landscape. This is wine country served with a special touch.

So the sun sets on a perfect day. We might have had the best of the weather, but we suspect it's probably pretty good in these parts even when the sun doesn't shine.

Checklist

Getting there: The Mornington Peninsula is 90 minutes' drive from Melbourne. Hire a car at Tullamarine airport so you can traverse the region.

Eat: Pt. Leo Estate (3649 Frankston-Flinders Rd, Merricks; ptleoestate.com.au) has several dining options, with Pt. Leo Restaurant offering two (\$90) or three-courses (\$120). Set aside three hours to experience Laura, it is a leisurely experience and a magnet for well-travelled diners; the Obamas dined here in April. A wine terrace also offers small plates of deliciousness: lobster rolls, oysters, olives or chicken liver

parfait (\$6-\$28). Or snack on a selection of Victorian cheeses while tasting Pt. Leo Estate wines. The cellar door offers three tiers of wine tastings, each with a flight of five wines (\$15-\$25). Be sure to take a bottle or two home for later. Elsewhere, Hotel Sorrento (5/15 Hotham Rd, Sorrento; hotelsorrento.com.au) has some stellar dining options, including ShiHuiShi, a mod-Cantonese restaurant built into the heritage property's limestone basement. It's good fun.

Stay: Cassis Red Hill (164 Arthurs Seat Rd, Red Hill; cassisredhill.com.au) is about 10 minutes from Pt. Leo Estate. Cassis occupies what was Artisan restaurant (and before that Poffs restaurant). The accommodation has been completely overhauled with luxurious contemporary touches inspired by owners Gina and Simon McNamara's travels in the south of France. Each of the five villas looks onto rolling vines; lovely touches include French linen on the beds, robes, Salus Body bathroom products and a well-stocked fridge inclusive of a breakfast spread and a half bottle of local wine. Rates from \$650 per night. If a hotel stay is more to your taste, the InterContinental Sorrento, about 20 minutes away, is a great option, newly renovated and plush (sorrento.intercontinental.com)

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