

# Colour me Orange

Sue Milne From: [The Australian](#) January 19, 2011 6:06pm

A BIG yellow sun hangs in a blue sky and glossy black cows graze knee-deep in lush green grass. Veils of creamy blossom drape apple trees and the purple flowers of Paterson's curse cloak the hillsides. There's red earth, white clouds, pink and grey galahs and turquoise parrots.

I'm on my way to Orange, Australia's Colour City, in central western NSW, and nature's palette, after 10 long years of drought, is spectacular.

All that seems to be missing, given my destination, is something orange. The city was named in 1833 by NSW surveyor-general Thomas Mitchell for his friend the Dutch prince William of Orange, and apple orchards, not orange groves, flourish in the cool climate.

While the city was built on gold, this thriving regional centre of 38,000 residents and its rural surrounds are perhaps now best known for their agricultural riches. Being an easy 3 1/2-hour drive from Sydney, the region is a top food and wine destination, especially popular during the annual F.O.O.D festival in April and Orange Wine Week in October.

At any time of the year, visitors can sample acclaimed wines from Australia's highest wine region, following a trail of more than 30 cellar doors, or dine at award-winning restaurants that have nurtured some of the country's top talents.

Although it's tempting to drift from one cellar door to the next, from one restaurant to another, I'm here to learn about the region's history and culture, which is why I am standing on Byng Street, in the centre of Orange, clutching a heritage trail leaflet and staring skywards. You've got to love a city that lists its first power pole - a modest affair with a battered light fitting dangling from the top - alongside grand historic buildings, such as the neoclassical

courthouse, built in 1883, and the imposing Italianate town hall.

Within a couple of hours, I tick off most of the 40 or so places of interest along the trail, strolling along wide, leafy streets past churches, hotels, the sites of the old jail and the city's first foundry, schools and memorials, before heading up Kite Street towards Cook Park, passing ravishing private homes built by wealthy merchants in the late 19th century at the height of Orange's prosperity.

All this walking makes me hungry and thirsty, so I head back towards the city centre and Union Bank Wine Bar on the corner of Byng and Sale streets, a don't-miss destination according to friends in Sydney, and I quickly see why. The old banking hall has been converted into a light and airy restaurant and there's a convivial atmosphere here and in the garden courtyard, with patrons tucking into excellent bistro-style fare.

The wine's the thing here, though, and sommelier Matt Heagney's interesting, ever changing wine list, with a heavy emphasis on local labels, has scored plenty of best wine list awards in recent times.

To accompany my Union Bank salad (leaves topped with crispy pancetta and parmesan mousse), I choose a glass of Belgravia pinot gris. Not only does it taste good (I pop into the wine store on site to buy a couple of bottles to take home) but it looks wonderful too, the colour of spun gold.

Before heading out of town, I call in at Orange Regional Gallery, which has a regularly changing program of exhibitions. The gallery stands in Civic Square alongside the city library, Civic Theatre, visitors' centre, council offices and a memorial to Banjo Paterson, one of the region's most famous sons.

It's late afternoon and the city is bathed in a golden glow as I check into my accommodation at Arancia, a luxury B&B establishment in Wrights Lane, on the edge of town, owned by David Buckland and Annette McKinven. The long driveway skirts one of their apple orchards and the house has a breathtaking view

across the Towac Valley towards Mt Canobolas; at 1395m, it's the highest peak in the central west.

While Buckland walks me through Arancia's manicured gardens to my room - large, luxurious and sparkling clean - the energetic McKinven hops off the motor mower. Later, all spruced up, we enjoy dinner together at nearby Racine at La Colline vineyard restaurant, which award-winning chef Shaun Arantz and his wife Willa took over about 18 months ago.

Willa's paintings decorate this light and airy space and the menu reflects the region's abundance of fine produce: meat, cheeses, fruit, vegetables and, of course, wine.

Early next morning, after a delicious breakfast that includes the sweetest honey, the yellowest scrambled eggs and the most divine poached fruits, all sourced locally, along with Arantz's freshly baked sourdough bread, I'm greeting my hosts for a day off the beaten track: Greg Simpson, a former Sydney police officer, now proprietor of Orange-based Simmo's Off-Road Tours, and Nigel Hobden, a city council manager and local history buff.

Our first stop is the summit of Mt Canobolas, from where we survey the wide, flat plains of central NSW before careering off the main track in search of an elusive lookout. Our rugged - and fruitless - off-road jaunt breaks the ice and by the end of an unforgettable day, which includes a visit to Paterson's birthplace at Narrambla, morning tea with the kookaburras at Borenore Caves, exploring the Ophir goldfields, site of Australia's first payable gold find in 1851 (State of Play, December 18-19) and panning in Summer Hill Creek, we are best chums.

Sure beats a day in the office, we agree, as we arrive hot, tired, grubby but no richer, at peaceful Arancia. Dinner tonight is at another Orange landmark establishment, Bistro Ceello, formerly Selkirk's, and now home to local chef Scott Want. My melt-in-the-mouth local lamb is matched perfectly by a glass of Mayfield pinot noir. It's another great dining experience in an area where it seems it's hard to eat badly.

Canowindra, one of 10 historic villages in Cabonne Country, lies about a 50-minute drive southwest of Orange and is famous for hot-air ballooning, food and wine, agriculture and mining. I've been looking forward to my Aussie Balloon Trek flight, which includes a country-style champagne breakfast, but it's cancelled because of high winds. Still, the weather doesn't spoil my visit to the amazing Age of Fishes Museum; the unique fish fossils it houses lay undisturbed by the elements for a mere 360 million years until unearthed by chance by a Canowindra road gang in 1956.

I have my own chance encounter at River Bank Gallery where I stumble upon David Isbester, the artist responsible for one of my all-time favourite paintings, a shimmering Canowindra streetscape. As we chat, he puts the finishing touches to a painting for his Figuration exhibition, which opens a few days later.

At Taste Canowindra, a showcase of local food and wine, I share tapas plates of local delicacies with owner Bob Craven and local winemakers Jamie Andrews of Hamiltons Bluff and Herb Gardner of Gardners Ground, all of them passionate about Canowindra's future as an up-and-coming wine region and tourism destination.

It's time to head home but I'm as reluctant to leave this wide, once-brown land as was Sydney photographer Max Dupain, who in 1988 was commissioned to snap a photographic memoir of Orange. Afterwards he wrote: "I could settle for Orange. The tempo is right and so are the friendly people; one senses a trust and an affection in the air which leaves my home town for dead."

*Sue Milne was a guest of Arancia Bed & Breakfast and Tourism NSW.*

[arancia.com.au](http://arancia.com.au)  
[unionbank.com.au](http://unionbank.com.au)  
[racinerestaurant.com.au](http://racinerestaurant.com.au)  
[simmosoffroadtours.com](http://simmosoffroadtours.com)  
[bistroceello.com.au](http://bistroceello.com.au)  
[riverbankgallery.com.au](http://riverbankgallery.com.au)  
[tastecanowindra.com.au](http://tastecanowindra.com.au)  
[visitnsw.com.au](http://visitnsw.com.au)