

# SALT OF THE EARTH

The Grampians National Park in Victoria is unlike anywhere else in the world, with its sandstone cliffs, craggy mountain ranges, water holes, desert plains, fruit orchards and plush grazing country. **Shannon Harley** gets off the beaten track to meet the region's producers.

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Salted pork belly  
with rhubarb lentils  
(recipe p 149).





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alt. Those tiny grains, jewel-like crystals or

ethereal flakes we sprinkle on our food religiously, but where does it actually come from? I'm ankle deep in the strawberry milk-hued water of the vast Pink Lake in Dimboola, Victoria, and I have salt on my mind, well under my feet to be precise. In this open, windy pocket of the The Grampians National Park, where the Wimmera River meets the Little Desert, I'm hand-shovelling salt from the shallow surface of the lake with *delicious*. Produce Awards winner Mount Zero Olives and men from the local Barengi Gadjin Land Council. The annual harvest is a joint partnership that produces around 30 tonnes (a pinch, on the grand scale) of this beautiful, unrefined, mineral-rich kitchen staple.

"My family have been at Mount Zero since 1993," says Rich Seymour from Mount Zero Olives. "Successive droughts and bushfires have made us look beyond the olive grove towards the produce of the wider region. We now work with a growing number of farmers in the Wimmera-Grampians area to produce a truly regional range of pulses and grains and, more recently, with the traditional land owners at Pink Lake, a project we are very proud of."

The Noma-effect of Rene Redzepi's stint Down Under has certainly ignited passions among us city folk to connect

the dots between the food on our plate and the dirt or water whence it came, but this concept is nothing new in rural landscapes, says chef Robin Wickens, who cooks only what he grows at his toqued destination restaurant Royal Mail Hotel, Dunkeld.

"There aren't many restaurants in Australia where you have the space or resources to have a kitchen garden of the size needed to truly provide for a restaurant," says the British-born chef, who replaced Dan Hunter behind the pans when he moved to Brae. "It's great to see how self-sufficient we can become. Since I've been here we have nearly trebled the garden program – we have our own snail farm, cultivate our own mushrooms and free-range eggs, as well as breeding our beef and lamb."

Wickens' menu reads like a greatest hits of The Grampians. There's pork from Greenvale Farm served with locally grown barley; buffalo milk yoghurt from Shaw River, who established Australia's first herd when they imported buffalo from Italy and Bulgaria over 20 years ago; along with the winter harvest from the Royal Mail garden, including quince, saffron, rhubarb and root vegetables.

"I wanted to create a rural Australian restaurant to give visitors a unique experience," says Wickens of his hyper-local tasting menus. "That doesn't mean exclusively using native ingredients, but rather local produce that defines this pocket of the country."

## SALT-CRUSTED ROOT VEGETABLES WITH SAFFRON PANCETTA BUTTER

SERVES 4

1kg rock salt  
3 rosemary sprigs, leaves picked  
3 eggwhites, lightly whisked with a fork  
6 desiree potatoes  
6 turnips, trimmed  
6 eschalots  
Flat-leaf parsley leaves, to serve

### SAFFRON PANCETTA BUTTER

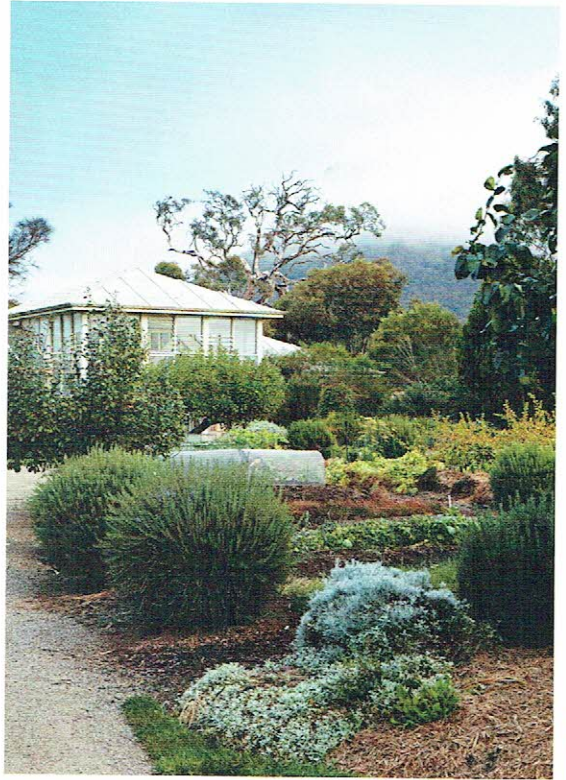
1 tsp saffron threads  
100g flat pancetta, finely chopped  
1 rosemary sprig  
100g unsalted butter  
2 tbs apple cider vinegar

Preheat oven to 180°C. Place salt and rosemary in a food processor and whiz for 2 minutes or until finely crushed. Stir eggwhite into salt to form a paste. Coat each potato, turnip and eschalot in salt paste to completely cover. Place potatoes and turnips on a baking paper-lined baking tray and roast for 2 hours or until tender when pierced with a sharp knife, adding eschalots for final hour of cooking.

For the saffron pancetta butter, place the saffron in a bowl with 1 tbs boiling water. Set aside for 5 minutes to soak. Meanwhile, place pancetta and rosemary in a cold pan and place over medium heat. Cook for 4 minutes or until fat renders and is beginning to crisp. Add butter and stir until melted. Whisk in vinegar, saffron and soaking liquid. Set aside.

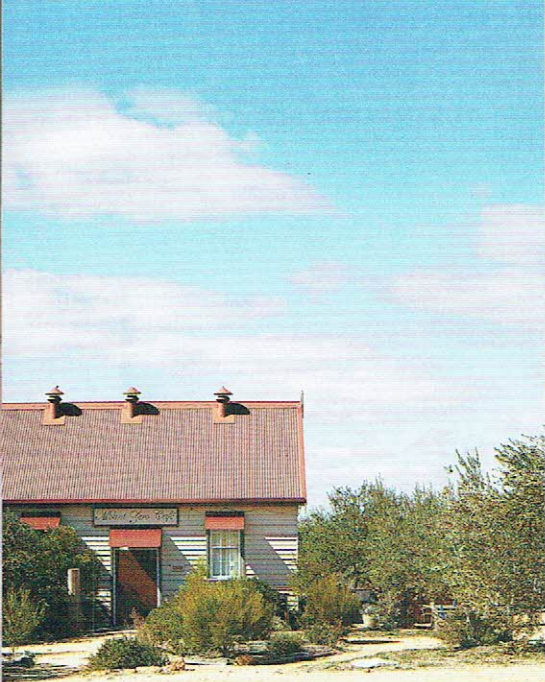
Crack open crusts from the potato, turnip and eschalot, and discard. Serve vegetables with saffron pancetta butter and garnish with parsley leaves.

AUSTRALIAN FLAVOURS.



CLOCKWISE (from left): salt-crusting root vegetables with saffron pancetta butter; Mount Sturgeon shrouded in mist at Royal Mail Hotel; Mount Zero Olives at the northern tip of The Grampians; Neil Seymour from Mount Zero Olives harvesting salt at Pink Lake; olive trees in fruit. OPPOSITE: the salt harvest at Pink Lake is done by hand.





**CLOCKWISE:**  
the homestead at  
Mount Zero Olives;  
quince & honey  
yoghurt frangipane  
tart; the view of  
Mount Sturgeon  
from the Royal  
Mail Hotel kitchen  
garden; reflections  
on Pink Lake,  
Dimboola.



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**SALTED PORK BELLY  
WITH RHUBARB LENTILS**

SERVES 6-8

*If you don't have a rack that fits over a roasting pan you can use the oven rack and position a roasting pan underneath to catch the juices. Begin this recipe 1 day ahead.*

- 1.2kg Greenvale Farm boneless pork belly
- 2 tsp each fennel seeds, dried oregano leaves and whole black peppercorns
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup (55g) salt flakes
- 1 garlic bulb, halved
- 250g Mount Zero Bio-Dynamic French-Style Fine Green Lentils
- 3 cups (750ml) chicken stock
- 3 bay leaves
- 2 bunches rhubarb, trimmed
- 1 red onion, sliced
- 2 tbs sherry or red wine vinegar
- 1 bunch flat-leaf parsley, leaves finely chopped

Place the pork, belly-side up, on a wire rack set over a baking tray.

Using a mortar and pestle, grind the fennel, oregano and pepper to a powder. Add half the salt and stir to combine. Rub salt mixture over the belly of the pork. Turn pork and use remaining salt to cover skin. Chill pork, skin-side up and uncovered, overnight to dry out.

The next day, preheat oven to 230°C. Wipe most of the salt from pork. Place garlic in a roasting pan with 1 cup (250ml) water and set rack with pork on top. Roast for 30 minutes or until the pork crackling is bubbling and beginning to crisp. Reduce oven to 160°C and roast for a further 30 minutes, then remove both pork and roasting pan from oven. (You will notice the cooking juices have been caught in the pan.) Add lentils to pan and stir to coat, then add stock, bay leaves, rhubarb and red onion. Return pan with pork on rack to oven and roast for 1½ hours. Increase heat to 230°C and roast for a further 5 minutes or until crackling is crisp. Remove from oven and place the pork in cooking juices for 20 minutes. Season.

Carve pork into thick pieces. Divide lentil mixture among bowls and drizzle with vinegar. Top with pork and parsley.

**QUINCE & HONEY YOGHURT  
FRANGIPANE TART**

SERVES 8-10

- 3 quinces, peeled
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (175g) honey
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (110g) caster sugar
- Juice of  $\frac{1}{2}$  lemon
- 1 tsp whole black peppercorns
- 3 star anise
- 1 cup (250ml) red wine
- $1\frac{2}{3}$  cups (250g) plain flour
- 150g cold unsalted butter, chopped
- 2 tbs pure icing sugar, sifted
- 1 egg yolk

**YOGHURT FRANGIPANE**

- 2 cups (200g) almond meal
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup (75g) caster sugar
- 160g unsalted butter, melted, cooled
- 1 egg, plus 1 extra eggwhite
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tbs plain flour
- 1 tsp vanilla paste
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup (110g) Shaw River Buffalo Milk Yoghurt or other thick pot-set natural yoghurt, plus extra to serve

Cut the quinces in half lengthways, then remove cores. Reserve seeds. Cut halves into 5mm slices. Place honey, caster sugar, lemon juice, pepper, star anise, wine, 1L (4 cups) water and reserved seeds in a saucepan over medium heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Bring to a simmer and add quince. Return to a simmer, then reduce heat to low. Cover surface with a circle of baking paper and cook for 45 minutes or until quince is softened. Strain liquid, reserving the fruit and discarding seeds and spices. Return the poaching liquid to medium heat and simmer for 25 minutes or until reduced to a thick syrup. Set aside. Chill the fruit.

To make pastry, whiz the flour, butter and icing sugar in a food processor until mixture resembles fine crumbs. Add yolk and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup (60ml) iced water, and pulse until mixture comes together in a smooth ball. Shape into a disc, enclose in plastic wrap, then chill for 30 minutes.

Grease a rectangular 34cm x 11.5cm loose-bottomed tart pan. Roll out pastry on a lightly floured work surface until

3mm thick, then use to line prepared pan, leaving the pastry overhanging the edges. Freeze for 20 minutes.

Preheat oven to 200°C. Trim pastry edges and prick base with a fork. Line with baking paper and fill with baking weights. Bake for 20 minutes or until sides are golden. Remove weights and paper, and cook for a further 10 minutes or until base is golden. Cool slightly.

Reduce oven to 160°C. For the frangipane, combine all ingredients in a bowl, then spread into pastry case. Top with quince slices and bake for 50 minutes or until cooked through and firm to touch.

Increase oven to 180°C. Brush fruit with some of the syrup. Bake for 15 minutes or until quince is lightly caramelised. Cool tart slightly, then serve warm with remaining syrup and extra yoghurt. ✂

**THE GRAMPIANS HITLIST**

Wake up to the morning mist covering Mount Sturgeon at **THE ROYAL MAIL HOTEL** (98 Parker St, Dunkeld) – “an absolute institution and oasis in the region,” says Rich Seymour from Mount Zero Olives. The stunning Grampians National Park provides the backdrop to Robin Wickens’ hyper-local menu, which relies solely on produce from the kitchen garden and local suppliers. Thirsty? Pick from one of 28,000 bottles in the on-site cellar, worth around \$2.5 million.

Wickens heads to **TOSCA BROWNS** (211 Gray St, Hamilton) for breakfast before perusing **HAMILTON ART GALLERY** (107 Brown St). He also loves the region’s latest addition, **HARVEST** (2 Heath St, Halls Gap) – “a cafe and provedore with a great outdoor eating space with stunning views”.

Sample exquisite renditions of shiraz and riesling at 150-year-old **BEST’S WINERY** (111 Best’s Rd, Great Western), where the cellar door is set in an historic, creaking, red-gum horse stable and you can tour the subterranean wine caves.

Time to work up an appetite; Seymour recommends the **MOUNT STAPYLTON HOLLOW MOUNTAIN** 6km circuit.