



Cold comforts

Christine McCabe travels up hill and down vale for wonderful winter tucker

LOVE the McLaren Vale in winter; the landscape of bald hills, bare vines and mist-dripping olive trees seems to be dozing, awaiting the kiss of spring.

Cold, grey weather is the perfect excuse, if any was needed, to motor up and over the ranges for a spot of wine tasting and a hearty lunch; and when cockles-of-the-heart warming fare is called for, you need a restaurant you can trust.

D'Arry's Verandah is perfect: a winter bolthole, tacked on to the cosy d'Arenberg cellar among twisted gums with broad valley views over vineyards to the ranges beyond.

The glassed-in veranda at the front of the building is light-filled and warm (in summer, tables are set on the terrace outside) and well insulated from the lively chatter of visitors quaffing Stump Jump, Dead Arm, Broken Fish Plate and other quirkily named wines by the roaring log fire in the crowded tasting room.

Ours is lunch *en famille* and after an ambitious morning's drive from the wind-swept shores of Lake Alexandrina, through Mt Compass to the Vale, our sons are ravenous. We need lashings of home-made dukkah, bread and olives and we need them now. The staff respond splendidly, exuding enthusiasm for the menu (always a good sign), producing wine list, bread and water promptly, sympathetic to the urgency of our situation.

The local kalamata olives come to the table blood warm. Purchased from Brian's Olives in the main street of McLaren Vale, they are marinated in the restaurant using lemon and orange zest, garlic and whatever looks good in the herb garden on the day; in this instance, bay and rosemary. Bolstered by several slices of crusty white bread dipped in Willunga olive oil and salty/sour dukkah, they help take the edge off our appetite (\$6 a plate for olives, bread and dukkah). Momentarily.

We set to in earnest with some Coffin Bay oysters (\$18.50, half dozen) served three ways: natural, with roe and sour cream and baked with pesto and parmesan. Freshly shucked, the plump oysters are tastiest unadorned but on such a chilly day, a little baking is fine.

With a pale sun shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows and plenty of laughter from the several family groups dining here, we feel cosy just reading D'Arry's winter menu: Jerusalem artichoke soufflé (\$16, entree); leek, parsnip and goat's cheese pie (\$22.50, main);

peppered Onkaparinga venison, from the nearby Adelaide Hills (\$28.50, main); gorgonzola and mascarpone tart (\$16, entree).

After much umming and ahing, son No. 1 opts for fish and chips (\$15; the kitchen is happy to whip up dishes for younger diners); Dad can't resist the duck brik (confit of duck leg in pastry) served with seared duck breast on du Puy lentils (\$28), while son No. 2 joins Mum in plumping for the house-made linguine with blue swimmer crab (\$26.50).

The servings are enormous and in order to recover our composure, pretending that we couldn't possibly eat so much, we order wine: a 2004 Lucky Lizard chardonnay and a 2004 Feral Fox pinot (\$7.50 per glass). With the exception of some Wirra Wirra sparkling, the wine list is composed entirely of d'Arenberg labels with all wines available by the glass.

The duck, served with pickled red cabbage, the lentils sauteed with bacon, onions and a little duck jus, is delicious and despite its Mont Blanc dimensions is polished off with alacrity. My linguine, with creme fraiche and Keta caviar, is rich and creamy but the incredible sweetness of the crab manages to cut through and I down the lot, while son No. 2 makes a good fist of his enormous adult serve.

We are totally full by the time dessert rolls around and watch in astonishment as son No. 1 makes short work of a Vesuvius-like soft-centred chocolate pudding (\$11). His obvious enjoyment, and stubborn refusal to share, leads us to believe we might actually have room for one more wafer-thin sliver so we order a small plate of David Medlow's Belgian chocolates filled with d'Arenberg's fortified shiraz (\$3 for two), which are sensational and, I fear, illegal for our nine-year-old son No. 2.

After coffee, all thoughts of sightseeing are abandoned and, belts loosened, we head home for a lie-down, the perfect end to a perfect winter's day.

All *Tables* visits are unannounced and meals paid for.

Checklist

D'Arry's Verandah

D'Arenberg, Osborn Road, McLaren Vale, South Australia. Phone: (08) 8323 8710; www.darenberg.com.au.

Open: For lunch, seven days.

Cost: About \$50-\$60 per head for three courses. Wine from \$21 a bottle and \$4.50 a glass.

Reason to return: The charming view and tasty fare using McLaren Vale produce.



Winter warmers: Diners cosy up at D'Arry's Verandah restaurant, McLaren Vale

Picture: Brett Hartwig