



RIVERINA

Long renowned as Australia's food bowl, this bountiful region of southwest NSW is now attracting serious food talent, lured by the fabulous climate and variety of top-quality produce. Food and lifestyle writer **Lindy Alexander** meets the passionate people putting the Riverina on the map.


PHOTOGRAPHY ALICIA TAYLOR



The Riverina is an Australian heavyweight when it comes to food production. Driving through the region, you are flanked by citrus groves as far as the eye can see, vineyards stretching to the horizon and small brown mountains of harvested almonds.

But only recently has it been recognised as a destination for food lovers, as young entrepreneurs return in droves to embrace their country roots and set up restaurants, wineries and tour companies, and producers and growers hop off their tractors to give farm tours as those behind the scenes take a step forward.

This is the heartland of farm-to-fork and paddock-to-plate, where more often than not, nearly everything you're eating is local and seasonal. We meet the chefs, artisans, winemakers and growers sharing the bounty this region has to offer. Welcome to the Riverina – the best-kept foodie secret in Australia.

 @lindy_alexander_

1 STOPPA FOR A TOPPA

"Griffith is coming of age," says Rod Pieper, the head chef of **Hot Olive Bistro** (Area Hotel, 208 Barina Ave, Griffith; areahotel.com.au). Pieper draws on his regular trips to Texas at this casual restaurant with exposed brick and timber bench seats. Another house specialty is a 'toppa' – a thin pizza-like base topped with tomato, garlic, oregano and local olive oil. "A few places in town make toppas, but I know people who come especially to Griffith because they can't get them anywhere else," Pieper says.

2 ALL IN THE FAMILY

Despite its industrial size, **Calabria Family Wines** (1283 Brayne Rd, Griffith; calabriawines.com.au) has the feel of a cosy, family-run winery. Bill Calabria's Italian immigrant parents started making wine in their laundry tub in the '40s, and while the scale has changed (Calabria now has around 90 employees and crushes 30,000 tonnes of grapes annually), the love is still there. "The beauty of working for a family-owned winery is that we are here for the long term and can grow alternative varieties that work well in the region such as pinot bianco, vermentino and montepulciano," says Emma Norbiato, one of Calabria's six winemakers and winner of the 2016 Australian Female Winemaker of the Year.

3 LOCAL HEROES

Chef Luke Piccolo and his Italian-born partner, Fabiola Valtolina, have created a real buzz with their

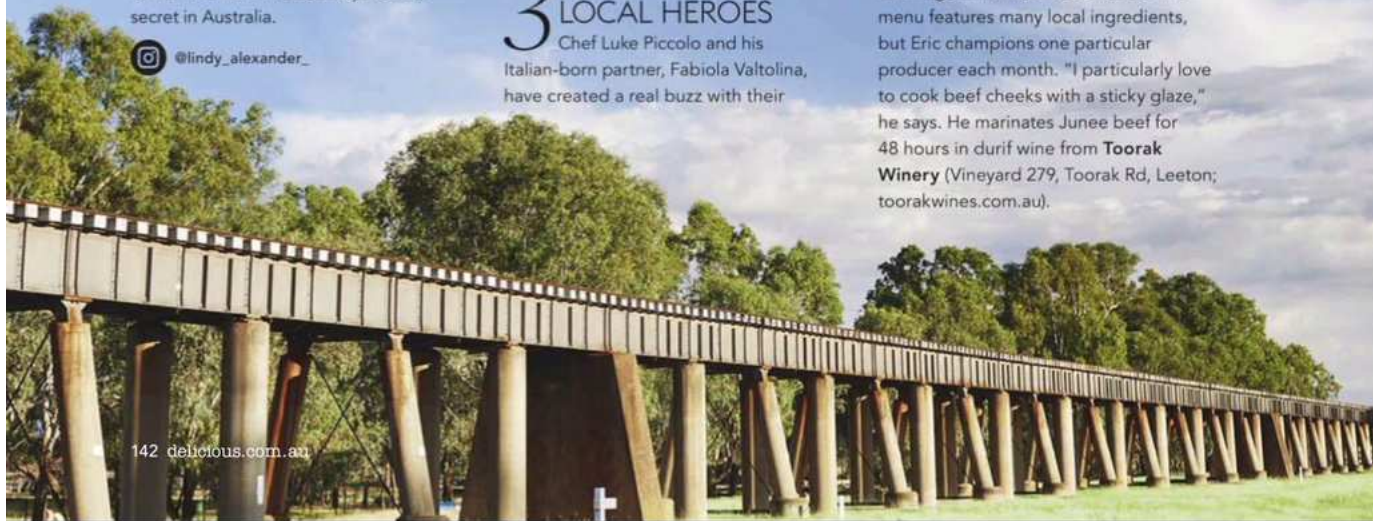
fine-dining restaurant, **Limone** (482 Banna Ave, Griffith; [02] 6962 3777). The chef's family's farm supplies much of the produce used in the rustic restaurant, which was hand built over eight years by his father, Peter. Luke started cooking at Peter's cafe, **Miei Amici** (350 Banna Ave, Griffith; facebook.com/mieiamici), before working in Sydney and Italy. Limone's restrained but beautifully conceived menu regularly highlights local producers – such as Randall Organic Rice's Koshihikari variety – a winner in the 2017 *delicious*. Produce Awards. "Griffith is an agricultural powerhouse," Luke says. "We are lucky in the country because we are so involved with the producers."

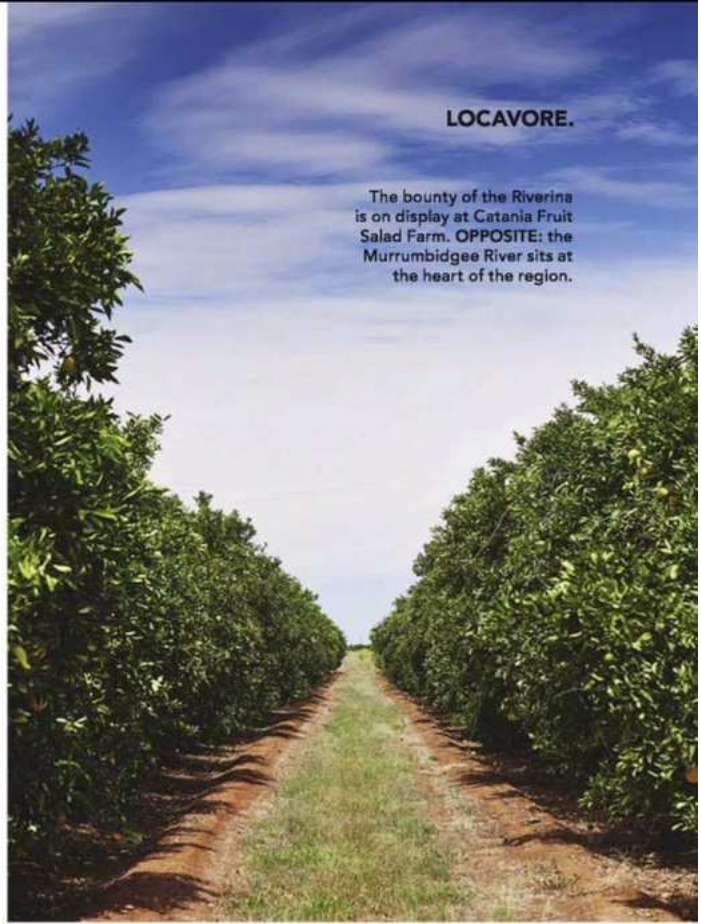
4 LARGER THAN LIFE

A rival to any oversized Australian icon is the enormous wine-barrel tasting room complete with staves and hoops at **McWilliam's Wines** (Jack McWilliam Rd, Hanwood; mcwilliams.com.au). Six consecutive generations of the McWilliam family have been winemakers. One of their best-loved drops is the durif, a grape varietal matured in old oak casks that produces plummy, deeply spiced red wine.

5 BOOK IN

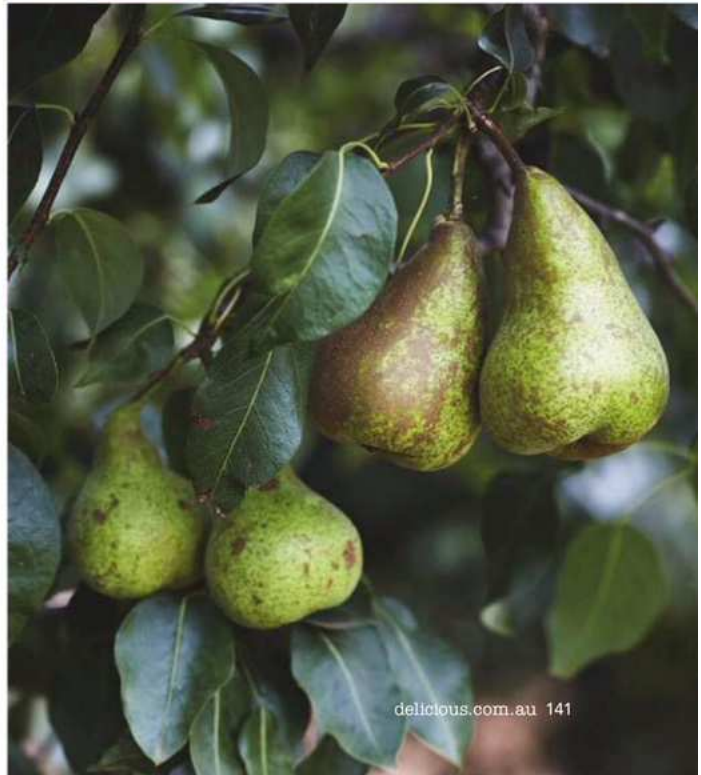
In the Art Deco town of Leeton is **Pages on Pine** (119 Pine Ave; facebook.com/pagesonpineleeton), an intimate and charming restaurant run by Frenchman Eric Pages and his wife, Vanessa. The menu features many local ingredients, but Eric champions one particular producer each month. "I particularly love to cook beef cheeks with a sticky glaze," he says. He marinates Junee beef for 48 hours in durif wine from **Toorak Winery** (Vineyard 279, Toorak Rd, Leeton; toorakwines.com.au).





LOCAVORE.

The bounty of the Riverina is on display at Catania Fruit Salad Farm. **OPPOSITE:** the Murrumbidgee River sits at the heart of the region.



>> 6 TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Hop aboard the retro '70s silver bus at **Catania Fruit Salad Farm** (Farm 43 Cox Rd, Hanwood; cataniafruitsaladfarm.com.au) for a farm safari. Owner Sharon Maugeri is a real character and wows visitors on a daily tour with her encyclopaedic knowledge of the 60 different varieties of fruit grown on what is one of the district's oldest farms. Make sure you pick up some 'pissed prunes' (left) soaked in port from the farm shop on your way out.



7 CHEESE, PLEASE

Coolamon Cheese (87 Cowabbie St, Coolamon; coolamoncheese.com.au) came into being through a mix of crowd funding, grants and selling shares to locals. It's housed in a cavernous building made cosy by recycled materials, tables built by the local Men's Shed, raw brick walls and a bird's-eye view into the kitchen and cheese-making facilities. Cheese maker Adam Pappill hosts tours of the small facility each day. Most striking are the hard cheeses peppered with local native flavours such as bush tomato, river mint and lemon myrtle.

8 SWEET TREATS

The sweet smell of warm chocolate hits you long before you walk into the **June Licorice and Chocolate Factory** (45-61 Lord St, Junee; greengroveorganics.com.au). Originally a flourmill, the imposing red brick factory with its distressed timber floors, exposed beams and cavernous rooms is heaven for those with a sweet tooth. The factory holds the world record for the longest piece of licorice (612 metres), and you can watch a machine cook, cool and knead licorice, sending out the black ropes to be sliced. Or if chocolate is more your thing, you can make a giant, organic Fair Trade freckle to take home.

9 BARREL OF LAUGHS

Craig Wealands, the head brewer at microbrewery **Thirsty Crow** (153 Fitzmaurice St, Wagga Wagga; thirstycrow.com.au), has a unique sense of humour. When asked to nominate his favourite brew, he doesn't hesitate. "Our flagship beer is the Vanilla Milk Stout," he says. "We brewed it to camouflage any crickets that might jump into people's beer glasses back in the 'Great Wagga Cricket Plague' of 2011." It's a sweet beer with strong coffee notes, and thankfully, not a cricket to be seen (or tasted).

10 CLASS ACT

"I've always loved food and travelled widely, but I felt we were lacking food-based experiences in the Riverina,"

says Tania Sibrey, owner of **Food I Am** (29 Kunzea Place, Springvale; foodiam.com.au). Sibrey set up the cooking school – which has a spectacular view overlooking Wagga Wagga – in 2011. Today, expert chefs teach the classes where you can learn the art of gnocchi and ravioli, make Thai street food, or learn baking essentials where you'll master *tortes* and *petit gâteaux*.

11 PRETTY AS A PICTURE

The prize for prettiest vineyard in the Riverina could easily go to **Borambola Wines** (1734 Sturt Highway, Borambola; borambola.com). The original homestead dates from the 1880s and is surrounded by manicured lawns, towering trees and row after row of vines. The wines are all estate grown from three varietals – shiraz, cabernet and chardonnay. "We decided to use the history of Borambola in each of our labels," says director Tim McMullen. The VIII Sparkling Brut refers to a time when the future King Edward VIII visited Australia to pay respect to the country's armed forces after World War I and spent three days at the property.





CLOCKWISE (from left): get hands on at Junee Licorice and Chocolate factory; the homestead at Borambola Wines; Tania Sibrey's Food I Am offers expert tuition; the cosy interior and (inset) tempting fare at Coolamon Cheese. OPPOSITE: Catania Fruit Salad Farm.



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LOCAVORE.

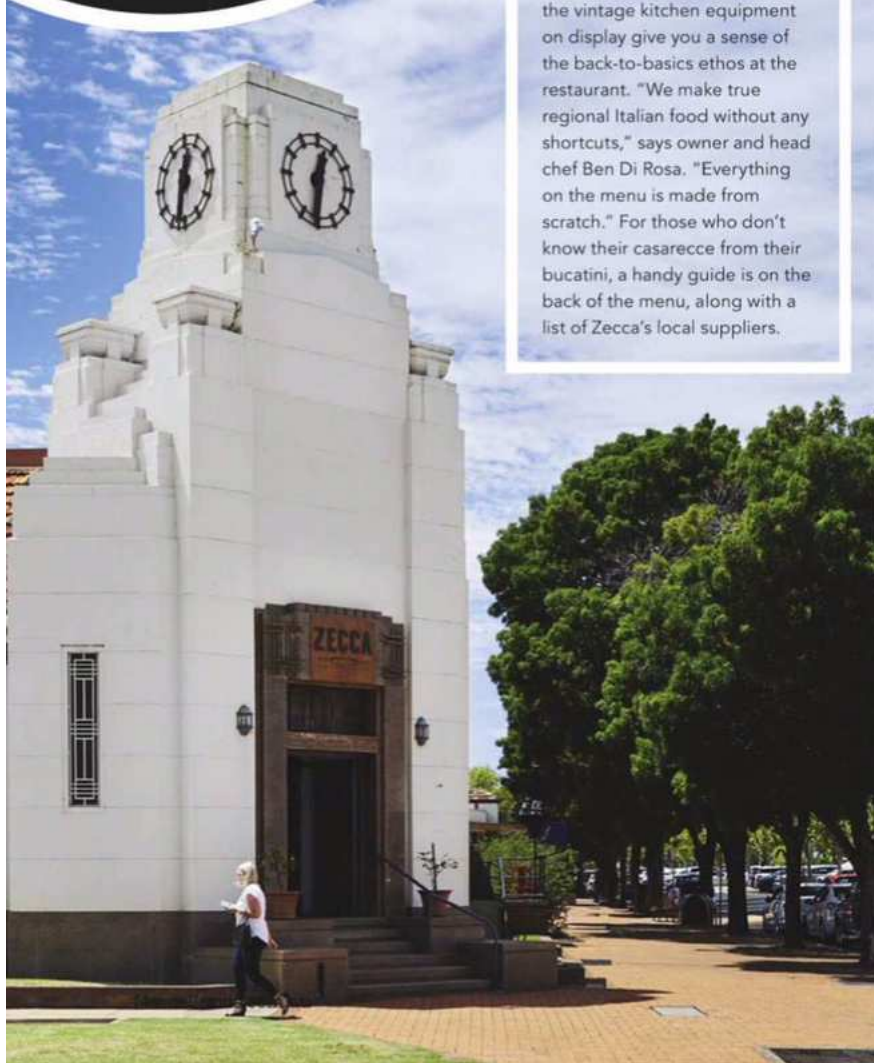
BENVENUTI A ZECCA
 NAME
 Zecca in Italian means "mint".
 \$\$ gets printed! This building
 the Rural Bank and this is one
 paying homage to its history.
 M
 nourish our community with
 ility, seasonal and authentic
 sing -fresh, locally sourced

» 12 ON THE MONEY

Inside a converted '40s bank is **Zecca** (239 Banna Ave, Griffith; zeccagriffith.com.au). The pasta hanging from racks to dry and the vintage kitchen equipment on display give you a sense of the back-to-basics ethos at the restaurant. "We make true regional Italian food without any shortcuts," says owner and head chef Ben Di Rosa. "Everything on the menu is made from scratch." For those who don't know their casarecce from their bucatini, a handy guide is on the back of the menu, along with a list of Zecca's local suppliers.



CLOCKWISE: the sleek and comfortable surrounds of the **Townhouse Hotel**; handmade regional Italian food makes Zecca the place to eat.



13 A BED TO REST YOUR HEAD

Settle in for a night of perfect comfort at the **Townhouse Hotel** (70 Morgan St, Wagga Wagga; townhousewagga.com). The executive suites are sleek and modern, using a subdued colour palette, with the cushions and pendant lights adding pops of colour. Downstairs, the menu at The Oakroom is small but thoughtful; showcasing the best produce the region has to offer. ✕



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CLOCKWISE (from top left): among Calabria Family Wines' employees is award-winning winemaker Emma Norbiato; visit McWilliam's to enjoy wines made from durif grapes; Luke Piccolo and Fabiola Valtolina of Limone; (inset) fresh and local produce is at the heart of Limone's menu. OPPOSITE: the old train line between Wagga and Junee.