



# ALMOST PROVENCE

## French flair in South Australia's Barossa Valley

CHRISTINE McCABE

Breakfast is laid beneath the old fig tree, its gnarled branches providing the merest soupçon of shade but an abundance of atmosphere. On a crisp white cloth are assembled croissants and baguettes, French butter, golden omelettes flecked with herbs from the garden and a cafetière of steaming hot coffee. Marie-France, elegantly turned out in espadrilles, crisp shirt and scarf tied just so, pops over to ensure we have everything we need. Marie-France, as you may have guessed, is French, and this gorgeous boutique hotel, Le Mas Barossa, officially launched last September with just four suites, is very, very French.

The gravel terrace is set with smart bistro chairs and tables, a pretty parterre unfurls beside the almost century-old grenache vines that provide wine for guests. But beyond the petanque court, the view does a bit of a geographical flip to soaring old gum trees lining the snaking Para River, not much more than a trickle in high summer, with galahs winging up from the lawn and parrots squabbling in the trees.

After all, we are in the Barossa Valley's "French quarter". Across the way is the sprawling French wine outfit Pernod Ricard dominating the high street of tiny Rowland Flat, where trees are neatly clipped in that precise Gallic style. Just how this little corner of France found its way to the Barossa, a region better known for dill cucumbers and mettwurst than croissants and cassoulet, begins with a love story.

Former classical pianist Marie-France, a Debussy specialist, came to Australia, married an Australian and for years her family divided their time between Melbourne and Paris. But when she found this charming old farmhouse and vineyard almost two decades ago, she was captivated. In many ways, the valley reminded her of the south of France.

Marie-France is not the first to fall for the Barossa's old-world European charm. Its neat vineyards, stone cottages, abundance of church spires and a fiercely proud regional food and wine culture has remained immune to the vagaries of time and onslaught of fast food. The idea of creating a little hotel came to Marie-France's daughter, Geraldine, seven years ago.

"I did a lot of research on luxury accommodation during my travels in France and inspired by my mother the idea of Le Mas Barossa was born," Geraldine says. The name



Clockwise from above: Le Mas Barossa pool and vineyard; breakfast under the old fig tree; bathing beauty; king suite; dining in the Orangerie

refers to converted farmhouses, popular in the south of France, but I suspect none is quite as smart as this Barossa outpost.

Geraldine has spent her career creating high-end events in London and Australia (her company runs Melbourne Fashion Week) and she has brought every ounce of her considerable style to bear on this little hotel. Forget rusty urns and creaking armoires, Le Mas Barossa is more Parisian in style, ineffably elegant and chic.

We had arrived the previous afternoon on a surprisingly cool summer's day, passing through tall gates and down a road lined with young plane trees.

At first glance, the 19th-century homestead is quintessentially Australian, with plenty of reminders of the property's farming history. A windmill is smothered in bougainvillea leading into the orchard; an old rose garden brims with blowsy blooms. The only clue to Le Mas's French connection is a fleet of bikes with baskets lined up on the veranda, and a little Citroen 2CV tucked into the woodshed behind a curtain of vines.

Check-in takes place in the Orangerie, a

new addition to the rear of the farmhouse, where Geraldine has merged contemporary French design with the family's collection of antiques. A huge bunch of roses cut from the garden sits atop a baby grand; one of those sleek, suspended log fires is set about with elegant sofas. After taking possession of an old-fashioned room key with brass tag we move to a table beneath that emblematic fig tree and Geraldine appears with a bottle of bubbles (French of course).

Almost everything for the interior of Le Mas has been shipped from France, including showstopping light fittings, fabrics, artwork, charming breakfast plates featuring illustrations from the classic Fables of La Fontaine and smart sliding bolt mechanisms on the french doors.

Each of the four guest suites in the restored farmhouse is different, but all are deeply luxurious, with feather pillows, best linens, and cosy bathrobes. The indulgent bathrooms are stocked with piles of fluffy towels and Hermes unguents in jewel-green bottles; our bathroom has a large tub set at the window. The bedroom combines a contemporary



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### IN THE KNOW

Grab an e-bike from the veranda at Le Mas Barossa and load the basket with snacks before joining the 40km Barossa bike trail passing right by the front gate. Nearby Krondorf Road is one of the prettiest thoroughfares in the valley dotted with settlers' cottages and some of the region's best cellar doors, such as Rockford, Charles Melton and, at the very top, tucked into the hills, the quaint Krondorf Creek Farm. In Rowland Flat, the rustic restaurant at Lou Miranda Estate serves hearty Italian lunches; in Tanunda, five minutes away, check out Vino Lokal with more than 30 wines by the glass from some of the smallest local makers. Guestrooms from \$700 a night, with breakfast. [lemasbarossa.com.au](http://lemasbarossa.com.au)



chaise longue with antique armoire and epic chest of Empire-era drawers. A little gilded table beneath the window is set with all the necessary coffee-making accoutrement (and designer kettle on request).

We settle on dinner in-house, served in the Orangerie Wednesday to Saturday; at other times cheese and charcuterie boards are available. It transpires Marie-France is not only co-chatelaine, but chef. "I've convinced Mum to oversee the kitchen for at least a year," says Geraldine. Mother and daughter have a lovely camaraderie as they glide discreetly about the hotel. When I comment that Marie-France looks far too glamorous (in pearls and heels) to be cooking dinner, Geraldine assures me "she wears high heels even when driving the farm tractor".

The menu lists a small selection of bistro classics, cooked with the sort of love you'd expect from a home kitchen. There's coq au vin, duck pate, mussels in a Pernod and saffron sauce and a perfect creme caramel. House wines are pure Barossa, made from some of the oldest grenache vines in the world, the grapes hand-picked and basket-pressed.

Although bijou in scale, Le Mas offers many of the five-star trimmings of a larger hotel, including turnaround service with little chocolates and monogrammed slippers. And down by the river near the petanque pitch, a very pretty heated swimming pool is tucked up against the vines. Geraldine intends to add a pool house and sauna and is meeting with architects to draw up plans for an additional six guest suites.

As we reluctantly take our leave, it is with promises to return soon, for it seems the south of France is closer than anyone would have thought. If it were not for those raucous galahs.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Le Mas Barossa.