



Girraween National Park.

BEAUTY OF BALLANDEAN

STORY CATH JOHNSEN | PHOTOS TOURISM AND EVENTS QLD & GETTY IMAGES

WITH A POPULATION OF FEWER THAN 350 PEOPLE, THE TOWNSHIP OF BALLANDEAN IN THE GRANITE BELT REGION MAY BE SMALL IN SIZE BUT IT'S BIG ON CULINARY DELIGHTS, AWARD-WINNING WINES AND ATTRACTIONS.



ORIGINALLY MAKING WINE in demijohns from leftover table grapes that didn't sell at market, Italian settlers in Ballandean, located 15 minutes from Stanthorpe in south-west Queensland, unwittingly began what is today a thriving and sophisticated wine industry.

For Robyn Henderson, growing up in Queensland's oldest family-owned and operated winery, Ballandean Estate,

meant long summers spent working alongside her sister and grandmother, welcoming tourists at the cellar door while her parents were toiling in the vineyard.

"My sister and I have been serving customers since we were about six," Robyn laughed.

"I remember my parents bought us a little plastic pool and every summer we'd be swimming in it, watching cricket and eating peaches.

"When we'd hear a car come, we'd jump out of the pool, wrap a towel around ourselves and run in to the cellar door to serve customers.

"My grandmother was Italian so her English wasn't good, but she'd pour the wine and deal with the money, while my sister and I would talk about the wines."

Almost 50 years since the Ballandean Estate cellar door first opened, you'll still find Robyn behind the bar, warmly

greeting the 40,000 visitors that pass through the doors each year to sample the winery's current vintage.

As Robyn proudly tells me of her family's contribution to the local wine region, she leads me out to the vineyard, carrying a bottle of chilled rosé and a generously-sized picnic hamper prepared by local chefs in the winery's Barrel Room restaurant.

With so much good food and wine on offer, it would be easy to slip into a food coma, especially as I had already begun the day with a hearty breakfast at the newly opened St Jude's Cellar Door and Bistro, also in Ballandean.

Over smashed avocado, poached eggs, herbed feta and spinach on sourdough, washed down with a Fonzie Abbott coffee, I planned the day's itinerary.

First on the agenda was a visit to the Washpool Farm Soaperie at Ballandean, a cottage store overflowing with handmade soaps, baths salts and shampoos; something that owner Melissa Thomas describes as "the town's best-kept secret but one that we don't want to keep that well".

Walking back to the car with a package of sweet-smelling soaps, my next stop is Wallangarra Railway Station Café for morning tea. Unmissable because of the giant Queenslander sign opposite (a

tribute to local footy star Billy Moore), this historic railway station now only sees the occasional steam train pass along its tracks.

But between the years of 1887 and 1930, Wallangarra was a bustling railway junction thanks to its location on the Queensland/New South Wales border. The difference between each state's tracks meant all travellers had to alight the train at Wallangarra and board another. Today there's a free museum that transports visitors back to the station's heyday and a railway platform café that serves up favourites like Devonshire tea.

Another must-see on the drive to or from Wallangarra is the Ballandean Pyramid on Jacobsen's Road in Ballandean. Standing 15m high and 30m wide, this impressive pyramid was made on a whim by a farmer using excess granite rock found on his property.

In the afternoon, it's difficult to decide



View From Wallangarra Station.

between wine tasting or a brisk walk through Girraween National Park to work off some of the day's indulgences. I choose both, first calling in to meet local winemaker Warren Smith at Pyramids Road Wines.

Warren's wife Sue is a part-time ranger at the park and suggests some scenic walks. Soon I'm in Girraween National Park and hiking the 3.6km walk to The Pyramid with the promise of spectacular views over rocky outcrops and eucalypt forests at the summit to keep me going. Positioned on top of The Pyramid is a giant balancing rock, which remains steadfast despite sitting on a tiny base.

As the sun sets there's only one thing left to do: cosy up by the fireplace at the grand Loughmore House with a glass of red. With enough room to house a family or a group of couples, Loughmore House is owned by tree-changers Tony and Andrea Ryan, who swapped corporate jobs in the big smoke to host guests on their expansive property in Eukey, just 15 minutes from Ballandean.

"Did you make it to Heavenly Chocolate, the artisan chocolate shop down near the National Park?" Tony asked. No, I didn't, but I know where I'm headed first thing tomorrow... ■

The writer travelled courtesy of Granite Belt Wine Country.

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Exploring a vineyard.

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Stone pyramid at Ballandean.



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