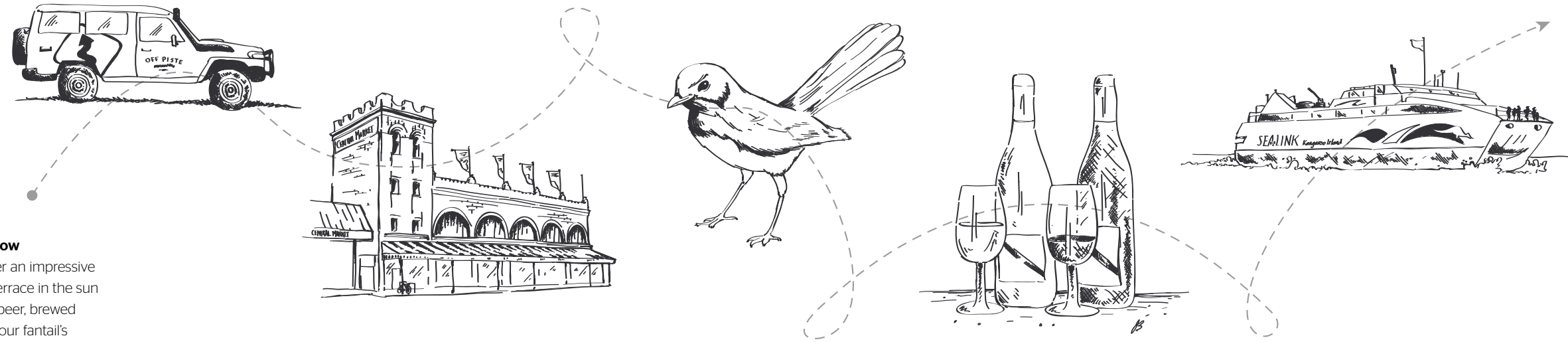




head over heels

From her kitchen, **Jo Elwin** daydreams of her newfound love



In between chasing sunsets and ferries Ben even managed to serve lunch, in style, on the beach

Off-piste means happy to me. I spent a good number of years working ski seasons in Europe and all the fun happened off-piste, in fact I have struggled to remain on-piste ever since.

So it was with high expectations that I walked through the arrival gate at Adelaide airport to meet Off Piste 4WD tours.

I was on my way to Kangaroo Island* for a food "festival" and I could have flown in to Adelaide and straight out to Kangaroo Island (KI to the locals) but I'd never been to South Australia so I wanted to take a couple of days to check out more of the region. The team at South Australian Tourism quickly had it organised; rather than drive myself around I would tour the Fleurieu Peninsula with Off Piste 4WD tours. Enter owner-operator Ben Neville and one very happy adventure.

Ben's passion is the Fleurieu, which is the area south of Adelaide that takes in McLaren Vale down to Cape Jervis where I would catch the ferry to KI the next day, but he knew I was here for the food so he wanted to show me the **Adelaide Central Market** before we left town. Up I climbed (literally, city-girl style!) in to his car – a Toyota 4WD Land Cruiser Troop Carrier which I believe is pretty special in itself but that's car stuff – and we were off.

Everyone, from chefs to home cooks, shops at this 140-year-old fresh produce market, the largest in the southern hemisphere. Unfortunately I wasn't buying to cook but I was ready for lunch and there's plenty on offer but I was set on a sandwich from **Charcuterie Traiteur Lucia's** – a family-owned business that has been serving

traditional Italian at the market since the 50s has recently expanded into a tiny space next door. It has a contrastingly modern aesthetic and a blackboard menu of fresh rolls with fillings that gave me great joy to read. I never visit Australia without eating fresh buffalo mozzarella (and ricotta for that matter) and it was here that I had my fix in a soft roll with prosciutto, tomato, basil and a generous drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

Coffee was around the block at **Coffee Branch**. Yes we were supposed to be on the road to McLaren Vale but I was interested in what makes up Adelaide city. I could see it was full of beautiful heritage buildings and gardens, but was inquisitive about the newer, dare I say, hipster side. Ben happily obliged with a quick dash off-piste to Peel Street, one of the lanes being transformed by the opening of many small restaurants and bars that previous liquor licensing laws had restricted. It is here you will find the very hip **Clever Little Tailor**, a bar owned by the team at Coffee Branch. They were just setting up for the evening when we popped in, but if they can make a drink like they make a coffee, I'd be a regular.

Here you will also find **Peel Street** restaurant where they are "bringing you the food they eat at home" and I have it on very good authority that it is outstanding. We cruised through the East End where it's all going on and down the cultural boulevard on North Terrace, home to the renowned Adelaide art gallery.

A little late, but very up to date, we hit the road to McLaren Vale and within 40 minutes were right there

pulling in off the main road to say hi to chef Nigel Rich at his restaurant **The Elbow Room** where we found him cooking over an impressive wood-fired barbecue. As we sat on the terrace in the sun enjoying a refreshing **Goddieson** (local beer, brewed among the vines) a bird that looked like our fantail's sinister cousin was frolicking in front of us. Ben explained that according to Aboriginal folklore this bird, the **Willie Wagtail**, is an eavesdropper that passes on secrets. I believe he was passing on one of the most sensational secrets to me – the Fleurieu.

The Fleurieu landscape is still full of olive and almond trees, although many have been replaced by grapevines, and as we drove I could have easily been back in Europe off-piste around the Mediterranean. You can try the olives and their byproducts at **Lloyd Brothers Wine and Olive Company** where they grow plenty of kalamatas and a drop or two of shiraz, of course.

It was time for a wine so we headed up the road to **d'Arenberg**. Having enjoyed their wine for many years it felt special to be here, sitting on d'Ary's verandah overlooking the vines that were turning more and more golden in the late afternoon autumn sun. You can get lost tasting wine here – their winelist is long and there's a quote in it that says "we're deadly serious about winemaking until it hits the bottle, then it's all about fun". It shows. They've been here for more than 100 years but are very modern in their presentation. In the tasting room there's no shortage of conversation thanks to the quirky names they give their wines. Who can resist a rose called Stephanie the Gnome with Rose Tinted Glasses, a Swinging Malaysian shiraz or a Love Grass shiraz – they all have a story to tell. The latter is a wild grass that grows in the vineyards with sticky flowers that stick like Velcro to vineyard workers' socks and, as gregarious chief winemaker Chester Osborn explains, Coco the winery dog. Chester says the additional varieties in this wine cling to shiraz the same way the love grass does. So you see, you could settle in here all evening (which may be one of the reasons they close at 5pm). However, at this point Ben pointed out the orange glow outside and got excited about heading to the beach to watch the sunset.



We raced along country roads chasing a sunset we would surely miss, unless the beach was just down the road, and it was! We arrived at **Maslin Beach** in time to watch the sun drop into the water and with enough daylight for me to see how beautiful the beach is with its large curve of white sand nestled in to red earth cliffs. There's a nudie beach here too, although they rather charmingly call it an unclad beach. Ben produced a bottle of his favourite d'Arenberg red to enjoy as the sun went down and after that, to quote Ben, it was "goodnight nurse", the day's adventures had done me in and I opted out of dinner – despite the extensive list of restaurants in the area.

Breakfast the next day was at local favourite **Blessed Cheese** in the heart of town and a short walk from my **McLaren Vale Studio Apartment**. Here you can also stock up on local ingredients if you are self-catering and they make an impressive set of picnic hampers and platters to go. Over breakfast Ben talked me through the day. We needed to be at Cape Jervis to catch my KI ferry at 3pm and there was a lot to do on the way because we were playing catch-up after getting sidetracked yesterday.

Any one of the previous day's experiences would have made my trip, but then we drove through the **Onkaparinga River National Park** I'd gone bush! "This is the real Australia" I whooped as Ben drove us through the eucalyptus and splashed through rivers, and I laughed

nervously as Ben drove us vertically up a very high cliff. "Poor car" was all this city girl could say at this point. "Nah, she loves it" Ben beamed back. The top of that track had me on top of the world and arriving through vineyards to **Samuel's Gorge Winery** where they work out of a barn built in 1853 and host wine tastings in an historic olive press house. The day I was there winemaker Justin McNamee was in New Zealand talking distribution, so here's hoping we get to see more of it over here.

It was time to take a closer look at some of the region's fine food producers but just before that Ben had arranged for me to meet Pip Forrester who, having established restaurants and cooking schools in the area, knows all there is to know about Fleurieu food and wine and dedicates her time to ensuring everyone else does too. We met at **The Star of Greece**, a restaurant set in what was a kiosk in the 50s, perched on a cliff with uninterrupted views out to sea and the coastline of Port Willunga. The restaurant's name comes from a ship that was wrecked below the cliff in 1888, but sitting on their deck in the sun, glass of wine in hand, I felt like I was back in Greece, or perhaps Portugal, where I have enjoyed many casual beachside lunches in restaurants such as this, and grumbled at why it doesn't exist downunder... Et voila.



We could have talked food all day, and almost did. We were now running late to catch that 3pm ferry. **McLaren Vale Orchards** which I was told at this time was bursting with over 11 varieties of apples alongside pears, quinces and figs. **Alexandrina Cheese**, **Fleurieu Milk and Yoghurt** and **Wakefield Grange**, where they process their grass-fed



beef and lamb on-farm, could only be pointed out as we found ourselves once again on the chase, this time for the Sealink ferry, which I caught with minutes to spare.

As I sailed towards KI I realised that I had fallen in love with the Fleurieu – its people, food, wine, the beauty of its landscape – the wilderness, the country lanes, the stretches of coastline, the wildlife – all so close to Adelaide city. Except for a few mountains (I did say I was a skier) it has all the elements of my dream lifestyle. But for now I will be content to daydream about it from my kitchen as I cook such things as quince and almond tart and olive bread – remembering the flavours of the Fleurieu.



Find recipes for quince and almond cake and olive and cheese bread on page 3

- Read about Jo's Kangaroo Island FESTIVAL experience at bite.co.nz/hot-topics/features
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