

Worldly Delights: Tasmania



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Gourmets find a bounty of gems on this heart-shaped island at the end of the Earth
Stephanie Ortenzi

Aussies affectionately call it the Apple, but Tasmania deserves to be called the Heart. It looks like one, and it gives life to some of the world's best food.

Across the Bass Strait, 250 kilometres southeast of Australia, Tasmania has a fraction more land mass than Nova Scotia but only half the population. Natural beauty it has in spades.

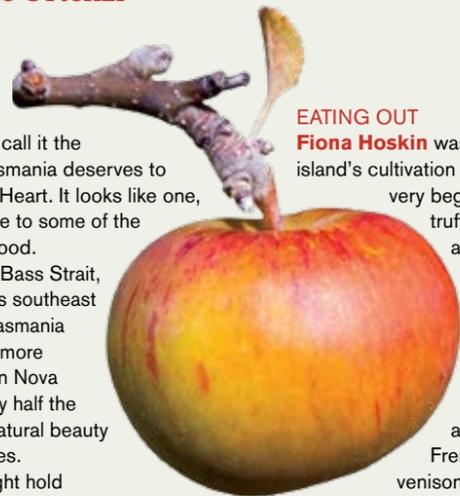
The sky might hold a passing flight of eagles. Eucalyptus grows in a spectrum of grey, yellow, white, blue and red varieties. Deep-sea waters are home to exotica such as clear-glass sponges, snow-white rays and pink sea stars. Roads have many hairpin turns and wind along the base of craggy mountainsides that lead to turquoise bays.

On the west coast, fresh water streaming down the mountains surrounding Macquarie Harbour is rich in tannins and nutrients, which provide an ideal habitat for **ocean trout**, one of the island's food treasures. So is **farmed salmon**, which thrive in pristine waters. Ferocious commitment to sustainability is part of Tasmania's cultural DNA. Law prohibits genetically modifying food. No wonder the world's first Green Party was founded here.

Organics are ubiquitous. North Americans brag about heirloom tomatoes, but Tasmanians grow heirloom apples and quinces. Commercial agriculture is pesticide-free. The **cheese** is world-class. **Wagyu** beef is raised for locals as well as for export to Japan. So is the local **wasabi**.

Saffron is a prospering micro-industry. Thanks to rainforest leatherwood trees, Tasmania produces a nonpareil **honey**: amber-yellow, creamy, musky and softly sweet.

However, Tasmania's top gastro-gem is the **black truffle**. It took nearly a decade of soil cultivation around oak and hazel trees before the first local truffle was ripened in 1999. European *truffières* use trained hogs to ferret them out, but since pigs love truffles, they often steal a bite for themselves. Tassies use dogs. They're indifferent to the taste of truffles, thankfully.



EATING OUT
Fiona Hoskin was involved in the island's cultivation of truffles from the very beginning, which is why truffles figure prominently at her restaurant, **Fee & Me**, in the capital city of Hobart. Her style brings to mind Alice Waters, with a devotion to honouring raw ingredients simply and with a decidedly French bent. She favours venison, hare, crayfish and abalone. Two of her characteristic dishes are ocean trout tartare with tomato and basil, and a layered watermelon and tomato salad with truffles.

Half an hour south of Hobart, **Peppermint Bay chef David Martin** lists his local suppliers on the front page of his menu – from buffalo and olive oil to honey, nuts and ice cream. He names dishes for the main ingredient's origin: Bruny Island oysters, Huon Valley mushrooms, Spring Bay scallops, D'Entrecasteaux Channel baby abalone, Cressy rack of lamb.

Like Hoskin, Martin loves French cooking and serves traditional greats like duck confit and cassoulet, following them with the technical flourish of an *à la minute* coffee soufflé.

Most of the Peppermint Bay experience is haute, including the luxury catamaran, which will take you to the resto itself or for a cruise. It has an underwater camera that relays jaw-dropping images of sealife, which passengers watch via the onboard plasma TV.

Goodbye, humble glass-bottom boat. Taking a completely different tack is **Flathead**, a casual 20-seat boîte strong on fish and seafood: during the day, it's a fish and seafood shop.

EATING IN
 For hard-core epicures adventurous enough to arrange accommodations with a good kitchen, Tasmanian specialties are all you need for inspiration, and any good local wine merchant will pair your courses with great Tassie wines. ▣

Worldly Delights: Recipe



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Menu

- Grilled ocean trout & salmon filet with wasabi*
- Linguini with black truffle & parmigiano (or not)*
- Wagyu rib-eye steak with saffron potatoes & micro-greens*
- Berries in season with cream & leatherwood honey*
- Tassie cheese board*

To get started, crack open a craft beer recommended by a local, fire up the grill and start the potatoes.

Lightly heat three tablespoons of olive oil with six to 10 strands of **saffron** and set aside while you peel potatoes and dice them into roughly one-inch cubes. Season with salt and pepper, toss with the oil (don't leave any of the strands behind in the pan), wrap in a foil purse and set aside to marinate.

Get the **salmon** as a fat filet and keep the **trout** whole. Brush them lightly with oil, and season with salt and pepper – remember to season inside the trout, too – and grill. Plate them with nothing more than a gingerly dot of **wasabi**, a gorgeous counterpoint to the sea scent of the trout and the salmon's richness.

Just before sitting down to this course, throw the potato packet onto the back of a lidded grill or into a hot oven for about 45 minutes. Test doneness with a knife. Don't worry if they're ready before you are. They'll keep.

To do right by the **black truffles**, take your cue from the Italians, who believe pasta is the ideal vehicle for truffles. They favour linguini. Toss with some butter, sea salt, cracked black pepper and generous truffle shavings. Some epicures demand freshly grated parmigiano here; others are vehemently opposed. To find out where you stand, try it both ways.

A **Wagyu** steak is dead easy to make. Nature and the farmer have done all the work for you. Do nothing other than season and grill. Pull it off the grill rare to medium rare, and let it rest uncovered away from the heat for five to 10 minutes. Plate it with the saffron potatoes and a salad of micro-greens dressed with olive oil and red wine vinegar.

The dessert berries in season need only a splash of cream and a drizzle of **leatherwood honey**.

For the **cheese** course, ask the local cheesemonger for an aged, hard cheese, a soft, rich and creamy one, and a blue. Three contrasting styles best reveal the characteristics of each. Serve them at room temperature, with toasted slices of baguettes, apples, grapes and walnuts.

You've just been to heaven and back. Good on ya'.



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