

## *From the Kitchen*

16 November 2011



Travel broadens the mind and tires the body, diminishes the bank account and enriches the soul.

I've just returned from a tour of the length and half the breadth of Tasmania. Five days of pleasant surprises and revelations.

The first surprise was dinner on *Spirit of Tasmania II*, the cross-Bass Strait ferry. We expected a passable meal. What we ended up enjoying was a sumptuous repast that would put many expensive land-based restaurants to shame. It was gastronomic perfection. For starters, a shared plate of tasters: cured venison on roast sweet potato; smoked chicken; pâté and lavoche crispbread. This was followed by tenderloin beef on a sage and onion mash – the steak so soft it offered no resistance to the knife. The accompanying vegetables were lightly steamed, the juicy flavours coming through with each crunchy bite. My wife enjoyed a salmon fillet with hazelnut, apple and leatherwood honey. I had not tried Tasmanian wine before – the red (mine – Rosevears Pinot Noir) and the white (my wife's – Meadowbank Sauvignon Blanc) were as good as some of the best Victorian drops I've had. We shared an apple, leatherwood honey and walnut shortbread tart. Yum! All this was finally washed down with affogato.

We had another go at fine dining on the return trip and were not disappointed. This time we shared an entrée of tempura zucchini flowers stuffed with marinated fetta and accompanied by basil pesto. We took our time savouring these. My wife went for the steak this time and I tucked into chicken breast with Moroccan spices on couscous scented with cumin, with minted yoghurt on the side. I have never had such moist chicken breast. Shared dessert this time was a very light (gluten-free) mud cake, coated with a white ganache and double cream on the side. Warm and beautiful with each mouth-caressing bite – my mouth still waters at the memory. Fine dining with friendly, attentive service.

We drove to Hobart (from Devonport) via the [Great Lake](#) and detoured to [Derwent Bridge](#) to see the [Wall in the Wilderness](#) – not a natural wonder but something created from the natural wonder of Huon pine. The wall consists of laminated panels, three metres high, one metre wide and ten centimetres thick, made of 'recovered' Huon pine and then carved in bass relief. It depicts Greg Duncan's view of aspects of Tasmanian history, including the fate of the Tasmanian Tiger and the Tasmanian Aborigines at the hands of the white settlers. The wall is housed in a purpose-built gallery which sits unobtrusively in the surround bush. The wall, to be completed in 2015, will be one hundred metres long.

The carving is exquisite and executed with humour and compassion. While the wall is huge, the gallery also houses individual pieces carved by Greg and his son, Daniel, which showcase mastery: wood carved to represent clothing hanging in soft folds, caps and gloves which you expect to feel pliant if you were allowed to touch them. This alone was worth the trip to the island.

With two huge conferences in Hobart, we missed out on a hotel room. We were fortunate in this as we ended up staying at [The Elms bed and breakfast](#) – we could not have wished for more. The 1917 house is beautifully preserved, with its wood panels, wallpaper, picture rails

and plate rails, bay windows, and period furniture and brass fittings in every room; breakfast at brocade-covered tables and eggs in eggcups. A restored garden (still a work in progress) allows relaxation in fresh air, surrounded by greenery and colour. The owners had us feel at home immediately and throughout our stay.

We were advised by a friend to visit [Bruny Island](#) and we spent a mere five hours there, having made earlier arrangements to meet other friends in [Taroona](#). At the nondescript Bruny Hotel we found coffee and chai latte equal to the best in Melbourne. The recently-new owner has thrown out the frozen and reconstituted previous pub fare and brought in a menu which includes locally-caught fish and locally-bred organic pork, and other mouth-watering promises which we did not have time to indulge in. I can imagine living happily on Bruny.

Walking along the Hobart waterfront, we admired the preserved facades of old factories and warehouses. Looking through one window we were amazed to see a hotel foyer. We ended up wandering the magical corridors of the [Henry Jones Art Hotel](#), which occupies seven contiguous old buildings – one of the most sensitive, creative and remarkable ‘conversions’ of old buildings to modern usage I have ever seen. Wandering along the corridors and through the more open spaces, the eye feasts on old wooden rafters and beams, old stonework walls and hundreds of art works along the walls.

The two days of work, ‘stuck’ in the Hobart Grand Chancellor Hotel for a conference, were ameliorated by the venue’s wonderful food and the staff’s friendliness and perpetual willingness to be useful and helpful, as well as their almost punctilious eye for detail. Thank you, Alvin.

Tasmania deserves five months of touring and exploring, not five days. We caught glimpses of what it has to offer: mountains topped by escarpments; countless lakes; rich forests and wetlands; strings of islands; preserved buildings (indeed, whole towns) from the eighteenth century, many of them still lived and worked in; excellent food and wine; sweeping vistas along glacier-carved valleys; birds of prey everywhere, including a hawk which flew next to the car at window height; and friendly people.

Tasmania, be warned, we’ll be back.