

EAT

EYRE PENINSULA

From kingfish to cockles, locals have enjoyed the bounty of South Australia's sparkling seas for decades. Now, a new generation is taking a sustainable approach to seafood — with mouth-watering results

WORDS: JUSTIN MENEGUZZI

Small waves fizz around David Doudle's ankles as he stands hunched over the clear water, hands searching the sandy sea floor for cockles. The sun has only just risen, yet here we are hunting in the surf for our next meal, the scent of tangy saltwater as invigorating as any morning coffee. It takes less than 10 minutes for us to gather around 100 of the tiny, smooth-shelled bivalves, and David has a hungry look on his face.

"Growing up, we could have cockles whenever we wanted," he says. "My kids now love eating them too. They'll gather a couple of handfuls, cook them over a fire and eat them straight from the shell." The former farmer has lived on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula all his life and now spends his days showing travellers his favourite foraging spots, as guide and owner of Australian Coastal Safaris. "Foraging is a way for me to relive my youth, but it's also a cheap source of food," he tells me. "It's so satisfying because you're living off the ocean. Anyone can do it."

To test his theory, David has taken me deep into Australia's seafood frontier — a jagged, wild peninsula that looks like a shark's tooth biting into the Spencer Gulf. It's here that 'tuna cowboys' — many of them immigrants from Croatia, Italy and Germany — made their fortunes during the 1950s boom, the mansions they built tucked into the hills overlooking Port Lincoln and the giant, ring-shaped tuna 'ranches' moored in the bay. We stop at one of

David's secret fishing spots, and shortly after casting my line there's a salmon grappling with the end of my hook. The next beach over, David dons his wetsuit and disappears into the water, re-emerging with a heavy bag of green and blacklip abalone.

David cooks our catch at the edge of a rockpool. With gulls starting to gather, we devour cockles glistening with garlic butter before diving into thinly cut strips of sautéed abalone. Simplicity is key, according to David. "If it's battered, crumbed, or covered in sauce, it isn't fresh," he says.

You'd think this was as fresh as you can get, but at nearby Coffin Bay Oyster Farm, the distance from water to plate is even closer — mere metres. "This is one of the most fertile spots in the region," says waders-clad owner Ben Catterall. A sandbar at the Bay's mouth helps create a bottleneck for the daily tides, trapping nutrients in the water to create a rich feeding ground for oysters. This means Ben can produce some of the best oysters in the country — and fast. "These ones have taken just 18 months to grow," he says, shucking oysters the size of his palm. "Anywhere else, it would take over two years."

To give visitors an insight into what it's like working on the farm, Ben has built a semi-submerged timber pavilion in the shallows. From here, we watch the farm hands sort through baskets of oysters, and learn how to shuck. Knife in hand, I work open the



A plate of freshly caught and cooked cockles

Clockwise from above: David Doudle's secret fishing spot; abalone slices fried in butter; Ben Catterall shucks an oyster at Coffin Bay Oyster Farm, which travellers can visit with Oyster Farm Tours

IMAGES: JUSTIN MENEGUZZI



Fields stretch to the horizon on the Eyre Peninsula

shell and quickly knock back the slippery morsel. It's like a kiss from the sea, the plump meat delivering a mild, slightly sweet flavour. It's perfect with the glass of crisp, citrusy Riesling Ben has poured. The wine is as local as the shellfish — it hails from Henschke Eden Valley vineyard, 50 miles north east of Adelaide, where, Ben tells me, six generations of the Henschke family have produced wine since 1866.

Despite the disruption caused by Covid-19, Ben says there's been one silver lining. "Our business only increased during the pandemic, I suspect because Australians were starting to realise what they had in their own backyards the whole time," he says. And with international travellers slowly returning, Ben says there's a sense of catharsis to be had from seeing hungry visitors wading out across the shallows again.

Enjoying the bounty of the sea doesn't always mean paddling out to harvest it, however. In Port Lincoln, at The Fresh Fish Place (a seafood wholesaler with a cafe) my lunch — two tender fillets of King George whiting, grilled and modestly seasoned with lemon and parsley — arrives in a rustle of paper that evokes fish and chips of childhood summers. As I eat, my eyes wander across the maritime bric-a-brac scattered all around the cafe, from reclaimed driftwood carved into fish to a pair of ornate, white chairs that swirl upwards into wave-like peaks.

"King George whiting is a local favourite, it's what everyone grows up on around here," says Angelica Sunset, the cafe supervisor. She takes me behind the scenes to show me the drive-through area where fishermen pull up at any time of day and deliver their catch straight to the filleting room. From there, it's prepared and cooked to order. "Our menu is directly influenced by the seasons and what our fishermen are catching," says Angelica. "If it's a stormy day, we won't have as many fish to sell, which can surprise people if they're used to getting fish from supermarkets. We make sure it's all line caught and sustainable."

'Sustainability' is the word on everyone's lips here. Overfishing during and after the fishing industry boom of the mid-20th century saw fish stocks collapse. Foreseeing their own demise if they didn't act responsibly, the fisheries on the Eyre Peninsula committed to catch quotas — and submitted themselves to regular auditing — to help regulate the industry, and to monitor species. Angelica tells me these restrictions explain why The Fresh Fish Place hasn't stocked pink snapper in three years.

For the critically endangered southern bluefin tuna, the lifeblood of Port Lincoln, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority works with scientists and the industry to conduct regular stock surveys and update annual fishing quotas. Fishing boats are tagged with a satellite monitoring system to

A TASTE OF THE Eyre Peninsula

LINE & LABEL

At this restaurant at Peter Teakle Wines — a winery outside Port Lincoln — executive chef Mark Jensen sources local produce and brings it to life with a twist. Think orange blossom lamingtons with stone fruits and sorbet, kangaroo *tataki* (lightly seared slices of meat) with green mustard and kimchi, and Coffin Bay oysters paired with coastal succulents. The menu is a la carte, or you can choose the five-course tasting menu from A\$99 (£56), with paired wines for an additional A\$46 (£26). peterteaklewiner.com

SARIN'S RESTAURANT

Housed inside the Port Lincoln Hotel, Sarin's menu of pub classics is headlined by seafood-inspired dishes that take their cues from Indian and European cuisine. The kingfish cured with blood orange delivers a zesty punch, while the tuna steak will have you questioning your loyalty to the bovine variety. Grab a table in the sunny room at the back of the restaurant, or sit on the outdoor deck for sweeping views of the bay. Mains from A\$36 (£20), seafood platters from A\$140 (£80), both without wine. portlincolnhotel.com.au

DEL GIORNO'S CAFÉ RESTAURANT

Co-owner and chef Kris Bunder has crafted a menu that celebrates everything the region has to offer, from seafood and wine to fudge and free-range eggs. A charcoal oven imported from Spain imparts a smoky flavour to the tuna steak and kingfish. Cooking masterclasses are also available on request. Mains from A\$24 (£14), without wine. delgiornos.com.au



Inspecting the grapes at
Boston Bay Wines

Left: Moving lobsters
between tanks at Southern
Ocean Rock Lobster



FOUR FOOD FINDS

1

BEER

Before the mid-20th-century fishing boom, the peninsula's biggest export was grain. Beer Garden Brewing uses local varieties to brew stouts, ales, lagers and more. beergardenbrewing.com

2

LOBSTER

Fed by nutrient-rich Antarctic currents and then plucked from the Southern Ocean, South Australian lobsters are a delicacy best tried between October and May.

3

OYSTERS

These shiny morsels are ubiquitous on the Eyre Peninsula. Enjoy them with a squeeze of lemon, a dash of vinaigrette, or in a vodka shooter.

4

GIN

Emerging distillers are bottling the earthy peninsula flavours. Stop in at Eyre Peninsula Spirits' new cellar door for a taste. eyrepeninsulaspirits.com

ensure they're not operating outside their designated zones, and some are fitted with surveillance cameras to monitor onboard activity. Today, stocks of southern bluefin tuna are classified by the Australian government as 'sustainable'. With the local tuna population slowly growing — by around 5% each year — the fishing industry is hopeful quotas will increase in the coming years.

It's not the only reason to be optimistic. At winery-cum-restaurant Boston Bay Wines, co-owner and head chef Tony Ford joins me in the dining room overlooking the vines and lapis-blue bay shimmering beyond. "We harvested the grapes just last week. It's been a good picking season, thanks to heavy rains," he tells me. I also learn that Tony is something of a local prankster, too, by the giant model tuna tail sticking out of a mound of soil — a light-hearted nod to the area's sustainable tuna farming.

This corner of the peninsula has long been associated with winegrowing. When French explorers first scouted this coastline in the 17th century (and mapped almost the entirety of Australia's coastline), they noted in their journals that the peninsula's Mediterranean climate would make the region ideal for wine production. Tony's parents no doubt agreed, which is why his family has been growing grapes on this hillside for the past 40 years. "We're so close to the water's edge, which has really helped give

us an advantage when it comes to growing," Tony says. "There's no frost or mildew here, and the salty coastal air dries up any grapes that burst, reducing the chance of infections setting into the vine."

Winemaking may be the family business, but Tony's true passion is cooking. The menu at Boston Bay Wines is seasonal, and during my visit Tony serves up a textural playground on a plate. A crunchy, fried wonton cone envelops a creamy prawn and avocado filling. Calamari tubes are smattered with smashed popcorn and baby tomatoes that pop in the mouth. Tying it all together is a top selection of Sauvignon Blancs and Rieslings.

True to form, Tony continues wisecracking as he deftly slices a tuna steak into sashimi and slides the plate onto the table. The raw tuna dissolves on the tongue, chased by the zing of spicy ginger. A salty breeze comes through the window and I gaze outside. A boat scuttles out to sea: likely a new generation of sustainable tuna cowboys, out for another day on the ranch. □

HOW TO DO IT

Port Lincoln Hotel has double rooms from A\$154 (£99). portlincolnhotel.com.au

Seafood foraging experiences with Australian Coastal Safaris from A\$318 (£180) per person. australiancoastalsafaris.com.au

Oyster Farm Tours from A\$51 (£29) per person. oysterfarmtours.com.au