

Early-morning fog lifts around Valleyfield Escape. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Great North Road is an idyllic rural drive. Guests can pick olives from the same groves that provide oil for Buon Ricordo restaurant. Rooms by interior architecture firm Pike Withers create an air of cool country sophistication. This Agape Spoon bathtub offers the best view in the house.

SHORT BREAK

DAYS OF PLENTY

There's enchantment in the air at Valleyfield Escape, set in the Hunter Valley region of NSW. This relaxing retreat caters to your every wish, even before you arrive.

STORY ELISABETH KNOWLES | PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT

Winter is the best time of year for my favourite kind of holiday: a do-nothing-but-eat-and-sleep weekend away. Of course, you could do nothing but eat and sleep on a summer beach break, but then you'd start fretting about what you look like in your bathers. And frankly, that's enough to put anyone over 30 off their dinner. In winter, there's no such worry. No matter how much you enjoy your food, it's nothing a big, woolly jumper won't conceal.

And believe me, at Valleyfield Escape, you will enjoy your food very much, because this is a DB&B (dinner, bed and breakfast) with a gourmet bent. Two

hours' drive north of Sydney, near the town of Laguna in the Hunter Valley region of NSW, Valleyfield is a thoroughly private, self-contained luxury villa set on a 93-hectare property owned by acclaimed Sydney restaurateur Armando Percuoco. Renowned for the signature dish of truffled egg pasta served at his popular Paddington restaurant, Buon Ricordo, Armando is the kind of host who makes sure his guests don't go hungry, even when he isn't there.

Which is wonderful, because having driven up from Sydney after work on a Friday evening, I am ravenous. My grumbling stomach won't allow time to explore the one-bedroom villa with its

contemporary designer fit-out. Instead, the marble-benched kitchen stops me in my tracks.

Cue a few saucepans, an impressively responsive induction cooktop and an array of traditional Italian dishes, which have been lovingly prepared in the Buon Ricordo kitchen, vacuum-packed and labelled with easy-to-follow heating instructions. Within ten minutes, my fellow gourmet traveller and I are delightedly moaning our way through a three-course meal we'd ordered from the online menu before our getaway.

Delectable entrees of lentil soup and *fagottini di carne* (sausages with truffled egg) set the scene for a meal that impresses



throughout. For mains, we have *braciolette napoletana* (rolls of veal filled with parsley, pine nuts, sultanas and garlic, cooked with fresh tomato) and *galletto alla diavola* (char-grilled spatchcock with hot spices and lemon), plus sides of spinach and creamy mashed potato.

To leave room for desserts – Armando's 'thousand layer' dish of baked apple slices and an orange tart with candied citrus – we reluctantly forego the *bucatini alla matriciana*, a classic Roman dish of hollow spaghetti with cured pork cheek and tomato. We plan to devour that for dinner the next night, with a fresh loaf of sourdough. But right now, with bellies fit to burst, there's naught to do but

remain very still and watch movies from the DVD library, until digestion is done and we can no longer resist the call of the king-size bed.

Because we arrived after dark, we don't fully appreciate our surroundings until morning, when a veil of fog lifts to reveal first an olive grove, then a river, paddocks, a rock escarpment and undulating hills. Such a view is best appreciated from the comfort of a deep, warm bath, where we wistfully pretend our lives have taken a turn for the better and this idyllic slice of Australia is all ours. And so it is... at least for the weekend.

H&G

To see more of the Valleyfield Escape property and its garden, see page 125.

Just a taste...

WHAT TO DO

Take a stroll around the orchards and olive groves, mixing with local wildlife as you check out the collection of contemporary Australian sculpture dotted around the property. Relax on the deck with a book or enjoy a tippie along the Wollombi Valley Wine Trail. Go to www.wollombivalley.com.

WHERE TO EAT

You're unlikely to run out of food as the fridge is packed with provisions, including fresh eggs, preserves, bacon and Tetsuya's smoked trout. But if perchance you do, head a few kilometres down the Great North Road to the historic town of Wollombi, where more Italian delights await at Panino restaurant and deli. Try the linguini with prawns and take home a fresh loaf of sourdough. Go to wollombi.nsw.au/show/panino.

COST

Rates for the villa are \$300 per night Sunday to Thursday, \$500 per night Friday or Saturday, and \$800 for a two-night stay on Friday and Saturday. Breakfast provisions are included. Three-course dinners prepared by Buon Ricordo are \$50 per head.

CONTACT

Valleyfield Escape, 3471 Great North Road, Laguna, NSW. For bookings, call (02) 4998 3312 or go to www.valleyfieldescape.com.au.