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FEBRUARY 2009

COUNTRY STYLE

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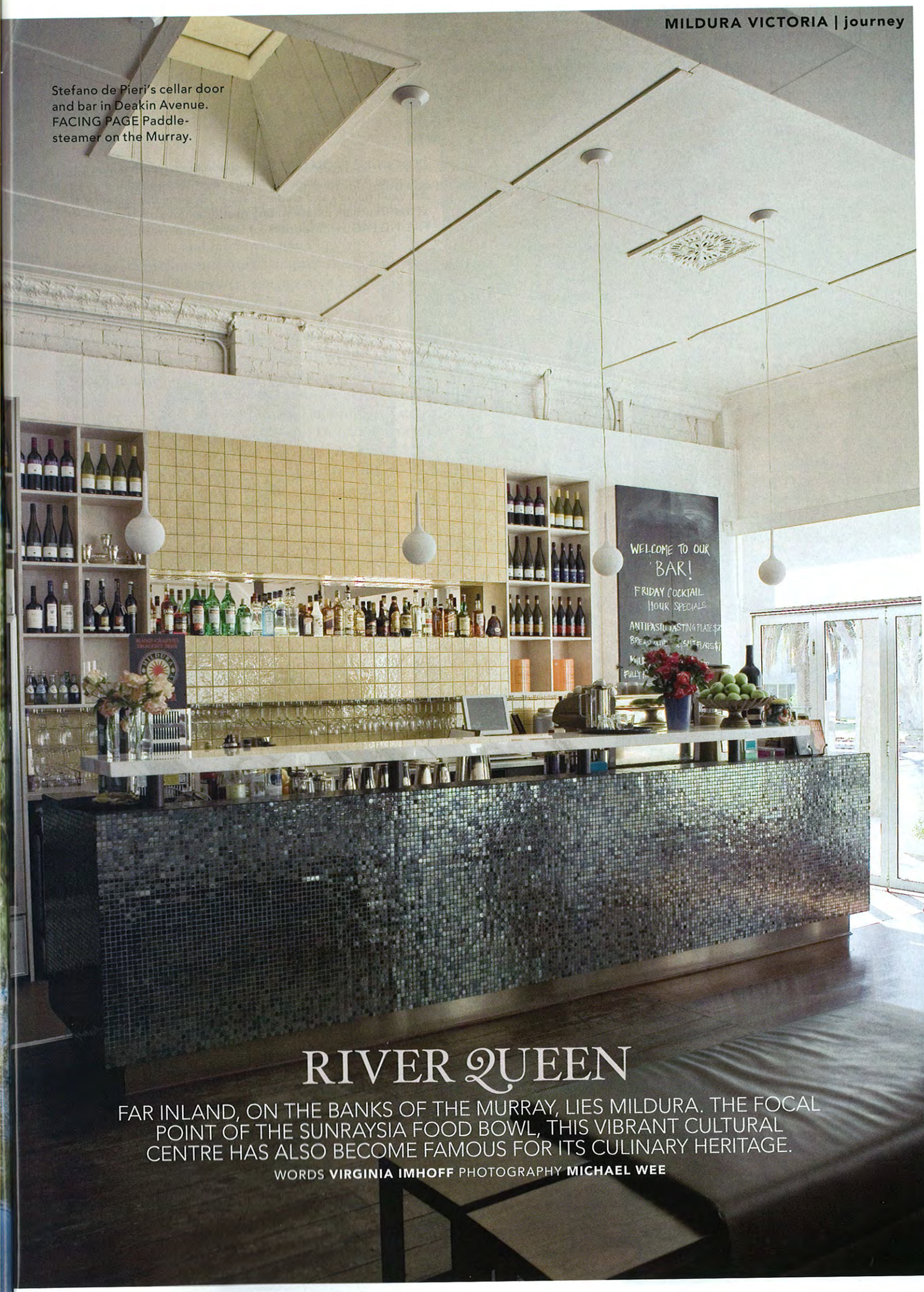


Stefano de Pieri's cellar door and bar in Deakin Avenue. FACING PAGE Paddle-steamer on the Murray.

RIVER QUEEN

FAR INLAND, ON THE BANKS OF THE MURRAY, LIES MILDURA. THE FOCAL POINT OF THE SUNRAYSIA FOOD BOWL, THIS VIBRANT CULTURAL CENTRE HAS ALSO BECOME FAMOUS FOR ITS CULINARY HERITAGE.

WORDS **VIRGINIA IMHOFF** PHOTOGRAPHY **MICHAEL WEE**

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Vines shade the pavement along Langtree Avenue; Julie Chambers recently opened the Art Vault gallery and studio space in Mildura; the restaurant at the Trentham Estate winery nestles among the trees. FACING PAGE Houseboats for hire line the riverbank.

APPEARANCES CAN BE deceptive. For all its much-publicised ills, to the casual observer the Murray River at Mildura doesn't give the impression of a waterway in decline. Fortunately, a system of locks maintains the river levels along the meandering Mildura section, despite vexed water management issues compounded by the worst drought in a century. But if the huge numbers of pleasure craft — from luxury houseboats and paddle-steamers to fishing tinnies — are anything to go by, the river's reputation as a magnet for all kinds of recreational activities and as one of Mildura's major drawcards is still very much intact.

Mildura, about 550 kilometres north-west of Melbourne, is something of an enigma and certainly a place of contrasts. The Murray River, forming the border of Victoria and NSW, has been the lifeblood of this now rapidly growing provincial city since the Chaffey brothers, irrigation experts from Canada, selected it as a promising settlement in the 1880s.

As one of Australia's major food bowls, the Sunraysia region has long been known for quality wine and table grapes, citrus, all kinds of fresh and dried fruit, and vegetables. These days, the growers — known as "blockies" — are doing their best to cope with water allocations that have been cut to the bone (as occasional groves of wilting fruit trees attest). Many are planting less water-dependent crops (such as olives and pistachio nuts), making value-added gourmet products and finding even smarter ways to use the little water available.

The main streets may be lined with shaggy palms and brightly blossomed trees but at its heart lies a sophisticated, cosmopolitan community bursting with vibrant energy. The easygoing Mediterranean feel here is in part due to the sunny, temperate climate but also to the postwar influx of migrants from

southern Italy. A more recent arrival, Stefano de Pieri, has done much to inspire confidence in the region and spread the word about Mildura's rich culinary culture and value as a foodie destination. His popular late-1990s TV cooking series, *A Gondola on the Murray,* shone a spotlight on the region's bountiful harvests and food heritage. Now you only has to venture along one of its main thoroughfares, Langtree Avenue (aptly dubbed 'feast street'), to see how the culinary heritage has been embraced by a rapidly increasing number of restaurants and cafés.

At the hub of this lively precinct is the Quality Hotel Mildura Grand, which includes recent arrivals such as the Mildura Brewery Pub and Spanish Bar & Grill, as well as Stefano's award-winning restaurant. If one is fortunate enough to dine at Stefano's, local delicacies such as Murray cod, yabby or Mallee lamb may well be included in the degustation menu. Just around the corner is Stefano's Café Bakery, adjoining his new cellar door bar and Gallery 25, which is run by his wife, Donata Carrazza.

Arts and culture flourish in this city, and barely a week goes by without some sort of festival or event. In addition to the Mildura Arts Centre and a number of smaller galleries, the recent opening of a privately funded multipurpose exhibition space and studio facility, known as the Art Vault, is an exciting addition and a boost to the local art community.

But the cultural sophistication ends at the city limits. There's no escaping the feeling that Mildura is the last stop before the outback. Venture a short distance from the giant red gums lining the riverbank — beyond the colourful >

ARTS AND CULTURE FLOURISH AND BARELY A WEEK GOES BY WITHOUT SOME SORT OF FESTIVAL OR EVENT.

WHERE TO EAT, DRINK AND STAY

• Comfort Inn Deakin Palms Beautifully refurbished motel-style accommodation overlooking Zest restaurant and bar, lawns and pool. 413 Deakin Avenue, Mildura. 1800 556 378; deakinpalms.com.au

• Emaroo Cottages Attractive, contemporary self-contained accommodation with all the mod cons. It's pet friendly, too. 0418 862 260; aperfectplace.com.au

• Mildura Brewery Pub Sample local beers on tap in this microbrewery, accompanied by a tasting plate, or stay for a meal. 20 Langtree Avenue, Mildura. (03) 5022 2988; www.mildurabrewery.com.au

• Mildura Holiday Houseboats The best way to see the Murray up close and at your leisure: on a luxury houseboat. 91–125 Etiwanda Avenue, Mildura. 1800 800 842; mildurahouseboats.com.au

• Mungo Lodge The understated cabin accommodation, and main lodge restaurant and bar complex, are designed for comfort with minimal environmental impact. Arumpo Road via Mildura. (03) 5029 7297; mungolodge.com.au

• Quality Hotel Mildura Grand In Mildura all roads seem to lead to the Grand, whether it's to stay in one of the luxurious rooms or eat at any of the top restaurants under its roof. Stefano's, Seasons and the Spanish Bar & Grill are all here. Seventh Street, Mildura. 1800 034 228; qualityhotelmilduragrand.com.au

• Stefano's Café Bakery This is *the* place to be and be seen at for breakfast, lunch or a latté. 27 Deakin Avenue, Mildura. (03) 5021 3627; stefano.com.au

• Trentham Estate A winery, cellar door and respected restaurant with great views over the Murray. Sturt Highway, Trentham Cliffs. (03) 5024 8888; www.trenthamestate.com.au

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The striking dry landscape at Lake Mungo; Mungo Lodge offers comfortable accommodation; a low-key, luxurious cabin at the lodge. FACING PAGE Eerie eroded formations on the edge of the lake; Graham Clarke from Harry Nanya Tours tells the region's story; olives are a major crop in the region; kangaroos venture close to town.

patchwork of irrigated blocks on the town fringe — and the wheat belt, and the vast red sand and arid scrub landscape of the Mallee country, begin.

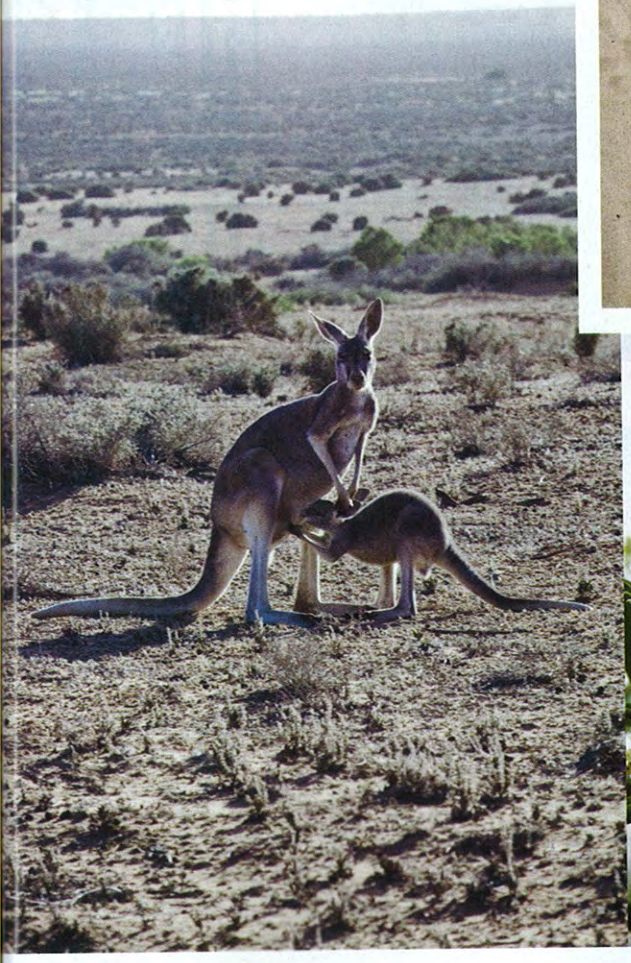
For those who wish to pare back and experience the big skies, the silence and the solitude of the inland, there's no better place than Mungo National Park. It lies within the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area in NSW, 110 kilometres from Mildura. The ancient dried-up lake bed has yielded 60,000-year-old human remains and the wind and erosion continues to expose artefacts and fossils.

One can explore the extraordinary eroded formations and high white sand dunes independently or be guided by the likes of Graham Clarke from Harry Nanya Tours. Graham tells the story of the traditional owners, pointing out evidence of their past habitation that only an expert eye can see. Sunset over Mungo is not to be missed, as it turns the landscape an eerie radiant pink and purple, sending a shiver up the spine.

You can camp under the stars at Mungo or stay in refurbished shearers' quarters at the old station. But for those who like all the creature comforts, even in the outback, the simple luxury and sophistication of Mungo Lodge, just outside the park, should fit the bill nicely. There's no need to head back to Mildura — just yet. *

For more information on Mildura, visit www.visitmildura.com.au, www.visitvictoria.com and www.visitnsw.com

YOU CAN CAMP UNDER THE STARS AT MUNGO OR STAY IN REFURBISHED SHEARERS' QUARTERS AT THE OLD STATION.



THINGS TO DO

• **Art Vault** For art lovers, a visit to this new privately funded exhibition space and artists' studio facility is a must. 43 Deakin Avenue, Mildura. (03) 5022 0013; theartvault.com.au

• **Australian Inland Botanic Gardens** The gardens feature a range of species from around the world and the diversity of plants from this arid zone, including salt-tolerant native species and a spectacular rose garden. River Road, Buronga. Contact Wilma (03) 5022 0906; austinlandbotgardens.org

• **Chateau Mildura** Established in 1888 by the Chaffey brothers, this winery is once again producing table wines and the historic buildings are open as a wine museum. 191 Belar Avenue, Irymple. (03) 5024 5901; chateaumildura.com.au

• **Discover Mildura** Personalised food, wine and cultural day tours. (03) 5024 7448; discovermildura.com.au

• **Harry Nanya Outback Tours** Explore Mungo National Park, Lake Victoria and the Perry Sandhills with inside knowledge from expert indigenous guides. (03) 5027 2076; harrynanyatours.com.au