



# Port Macquarie – a gourmet's trail

A gourmet trail of Port Macquarie is like a degustation meal – a nibble of fresh produce, a taste of personal service and a serve of ocean views, all matched with local wines. If you haven't visited the region for years, it's worth a second helping, as Louise Goldsbury discovers.

**P**ort, as it's known, has picked up its game in the eating stakes in recent years. Modern restaurants are doing wonders with local produce, and cosmopolitan cafes are spread along beautiful beaches and the Hastings River. The markets in the area also reveal some exceptional finds for foodies, and you can visit the producers direct at nut farms, oyster farms, orchards and vineyards.

As a testament to the area's culinary progress, this year's Restaurant Awards for Excellence (Northern NSW) has three out of five finalists in the Contemporary Australian Restaurant category located in Port Macquarie: The Stunned Mullet, Fusion 7 and Restaurant Splash. The city also dominates the seafood category, with finalists including Scampis, the Famous Whalebone Wharf Restaurant and Tommy's by the Beach.

The Stunned Mullet last year won best new restaurant. Opposite Town Beach, the casual venue belies its



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sophisticated menu. Gnocchi is dressed up with wild mushrooms, cauliflower polonaise and truffle oil, while the slow-cooked pork belly is a crispy delight. Don't miss the chocolate licorice gelato and the fabulous wines.

Also new on the cuisine scene, Fusion 7 opened last year and still sees a queue out the door on weekends. Owner and head chef Lindsey Schwab describes his style as "very rustic, good honest food, fusing flavours from around the world". He changes the menu every couple of weeks, and his signature dish is kangaroo on potato rosti with green beans and beetroot pesto.

Fusion 7 also does an amazingly good-value lunch. A couple of options include prawn, coconut and bok choy laksa with rice noodles, shallots and coriander, or the chargrilled lemon baby squid on Greek salad with saffron aioli.

The Corner is Port's latest



restaurant/cafe, where chef Chris Fagan creates an impressive seasonal menu. Highlights are the local Camden Haven oysters, sautéed prawns, mezze plates, handmade pasta and huge gourmet pizzas using dough made onsite every day.

The wine list focuses on boutique styles, and most are available by the glass. Breakfasts are also a winner, offering hotcakes with mascarpone and banana, and pastries cooked fresh every morning.

For a sample of delectable, French-style wine, visit the gorgeous Cassegrain Winery. John Cassegrain came to Australia from France, and in 1980 established the first vineyard in the Port Macquarie region. Set among rose gardens planted by his wife, John uses French winemaking methods and the highest quality fruit.

Cassegrain was the first winery to grow and commercially produce chambourcin in Australia, and the winery does a lovely range of reserves.

After a few tastings with the friendly and knowledgeable cellar-door staff, choose your favourite by the glass at Ca Marche Restaurant, recently awarded best new restaurant in northern NSW.

### Coastal drive

Leaving the city, the coastal drive from Port Macquarie traces the region's best swimming holes in a matter of 10 minutes, but there are lots of places to stop and relax for a few hours.

From Town Beach, the road leads to Oxley Beach and the family-friendly Flynn's Beach. Just offshore, Big Rock and Little Rock are good for diving.

If you're travelling with pets, you can walk your dog on Nobby's Beach all the way to Harry's Lookout. Lighthouse Beach, where the late-1800s lighthouse still operates, also has a great lookout, which can be reached via a new walkway that starts in the Sea Acres Nature Reserve.

Sea Acres is one of the few

remaining places in NSW where the rainforest meets the sea. Follow the 1.2km elevated rainforest boardwalk through the impossibly straight and slender eucalyptus trees, then take a break at the top-notch cafe.

From June, you can watch whales from the hill and enjoy the view out towards the magnificent North Brother Mountain. You can take a drive up the mountain to the North Brother Lookout, a must according to locals, though unsuitable for caravans.

For dinner, try Lotus at Lighthouse, which was last year named the NSW north coast's best Chinese restaurant, and is in the running again this year.

Stretching up to Lake Cathie (pronounced cat-eye), the Lake Innes National Park is Aboriginal-owned and protected. It's a lovely drive past Laurieton, North Haven and Bonny Hills, where you can choose from a number of beachfront or riverside accommodation. »

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## Travel Comfort food



North Haven has a strip of good eateries along the river, including Relish and Sandbar, while our guide, Kylie Malligan, of Let's Go Travel, describes the pie shop as "addictive".

### Greater Port Macquarie

There are several oyster leases in Greater Port Macquarie. Armstrong's Oysters in Laurieton is ideally positioned on the banks of the Camden Haven River. The family-run business produces two million oysters a year and is trying to keep the Sydney Rock Oyster alive, since its demise at the Hawkesbury.

Watch how oysters are farmed behind the scenes, including the Oystek machine, which counts and grades 1200 dozen oysters an hour.

### Where to stay and eat

Some of Port Macquarie's best dining spots are attached to hotels, which makes things easier for visitors.

#### Macquarie Waters (The Corner Restaurant Cafe)

Kids will love the 'dive-in theatre' – watching movies in the pool on Saturday evenings. Adults will love the rooftop hot tub and hammocks. The large rooms have ocean views, balconies and spa baths. Free wireless and parking are available. Call 6584 5755.



Armstrong's delivers to about 10 local restaurants, including Sandbar and Relish, and the public can buy direct.

Carry on to Kendall, known as the poet's village, and you're suddenly in the countryside. The acreages are surrounded by Dooragan National Park and other nature reserves.

On the way in, an old sign reads 'Kendall 1/2 mile', which sets the scene for the historic village. There is a poet's walk, a heritage walk, an 1889 Anglican church and, a little further

on, Lorne Valley Macadamia Farm Cafe.

Perfect for a relaxing afternoon, this beautiful place specialises in macadamias of all types: smoked, salted, garlic, chilli, honey, as well as delicious macadamia-based meals. Try fettuccine with macadamia and basil pesto, or a macadamia chicken satay salad, followed by a macadamia slice and macadamia ice cream. Finish with macadamia tea and macadamia shortbread biscuits.

Managers Jo and Ray Scott moved here from Sydney 12 years ago for a tree change, and there are 1400 trees in their orchard to prove it. A former tearoom, the indoor/outdoor cafe is very popular, and you can wander around the farm after lunch.

The Hastings Farmers' Markets, held on the fourth Saturday of each month at the Wauchope Showground, is an indoor/outdoor collection of stalls selling the brilliant fresh produce of Greater Port Macquarie. Meet the growers, sample the food, and get tips

#### The Observatory (Coast Cafe and Bar)

Opposite Town Beach, the north coast's most award-winning apartment hotel has gorgeous penthouses and townhouses with gourmet kitchens and large balconies. Call 6586 8000.

#### Rydges (Compass Restaurant)

Hastings River, some of the revamped suites look more like fashionable homes than a hotel room. Compass serves great local and regional cuisine. Call 6589 2888.



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on how best to prepare it. Cooking demonstrations, using local produce, are held in the morning.


Cooking classes are also held west of Wauchope at The Company Farm. Run by Lyn Withers and Trish Richards, Neil Perry's business partner, the farm is famous for its supply of fruit, vegetables and herbs to Sydney restaurants such as Rockpool and Sailors Thai, as well as a dozen Port Macquarie venues.

Chefs from the local award-winning restaurants host Cooking With Company's weekly classes. Decide on the style of food you'd like to learn, or just watch as the guest chef prepares your six-course lunch for \$85. It's also worth the drive just to see the kitchen's breathtaking views and the Hastings River, which cuts through the property.

Near Wauchope, Bago Vineyards sits on Herons Creek under the shadow of Bago Mountain, with great views of the valley. At this family-owned winery, you can observe winemaking in the

tradition of the 1800s, and taste wines from the barrels. Live jazz is held on the lawns and under the pergola on the second Sunday of each month.

About 15 minutes north of Port Macquarie, Ricardoes Tomatoes is also worth a visit – the 18,000 vines are a sight to behold. Taste the difference of organic, vine-ripened Tradiro tomatoes, available at the farm gate seven days a week.

Another gourmet attraction is Blue Poles at Byabarra. Built by artists to house contemporary art in a bush setting, it remains a gallery but now also boasts a cafe and holiday studio. The cafe serves homemade lunches from Thursday to Sunday, overlooking the beautiful valley below. 

*All information correct at time of print.*

1 Tacking Lighthouse at Lighthouse Beach | 2 Duck breast at Fusion 7 | 3 Delicious fare at The Corner | 4 Dinner's up | 5 Grapes/Lake Innes Ruins | 6 Trawlers on Hastings River | 7 Preparing tables at The Stunned Mullet | 8 Produce at Cassegrain Winery | 9 Jetty on Hastings River | 10 Busy in the kitchen at The Corner

### Getting there

You can use the NRMA's Travel Planner to map out your route to and around Port Macquarie and to find out things to do and see along the way. Visit [www.mynrma.com.au/planner](http://www.mynrma.com.au/planner). For a great range of accommodation ideas, check out *Open Road's* Holiday Accommodation Guide by turning to page 59 of this issue or visit [www.openroad.com.au](http://www.openroad.com.au).

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