

TRAVEL QUEENSLAND



Above: Fine gin courtesy of Husk Distillers. Below: the distillery's Paul Messenger. Right: Osteria's Mark Wilson and Lee Middendorf.



The Tweed steals into the limelight

This laidback shire is stepping out of the shadows of its famous neighbours, writes **Ute Junker**.

It's Sunday morning but there is no sleeping in for Lee Middendorf. The co-owner of Osteria restaurant at Casuarina is up bright and early, adding redgum logs to the fire over which two porchetta roasts will soon be roasting. "Sometimes we do pork belly, or legs of lamb, or a big bit of beef rib," Middendorf says of his regular Sunday roasts. "The locals love it; from mid-morning, their noses catch the aroma drifting down the street."

Middendorf and his business partner, Mark Wilson, are partial to the occasional carnivorous celebration. Another favourite is an event called Two Crazy Guys and a Barbecue, which always features a guest winemaker.

"We don't do 12-course degustations; we just showcase what we love in food and wine," Middendorf says. "It's like being at your mate's place having a barbecue."

This laidback approach to fine food and wine has helped the pair found a growing empire. Their first outlet, Sandbar Grill, opened in 2010, evolved into Osteria, which includes not just a restaurant but a bakery, herb garden, shop and events space. That was followed by Taverna, a Greek diner at Kingscliff Beach; a riverside wedding venue, Ancora; and the new Bombay Cricketers' Club at Salt Village, south of Kingscliff.

Middendorf attributes some of their success to the right place, right time factor. "The community is growing, tourism is growing; the Tweed is really coming alive," he says. "As businesses, we are not competing with each other. We are all working together."

It is a turning point for the Tweed. Long overshadowed by its more glamorous neighbours, Byron Bay to the south and the Gold Coast to the north, the Tweed can match either destination for endless sandy beaches and lush hinterlands. Where it has not kept pace is in the development of high-end resorts and destination dining. The local tourism board, Destination Tweed, is in no hurry to change that, however.

"We don't want to be a mass tourism destination," says Destination Tweed's

acting chief executive, Rose Wright. "We want to grow slowly and incrementally, and draw a very specific target market – people who appreciate the opportunity to relax and unwind in beautiful surroundings."

Wright and I meet on a Mount Warning Tours rainforest cruise, which explores the area's natural heritage. As we float past pelicans, egrets and ospreys, Wright points out that "this is the third-most-biodiverse region in Australia". There are 130 subtropical plant species in the region's rainforests, four dating back to the days of the super-continent, Gondwana.

Another of the Tweed's strengths, Wright continues, is its food: "We have amazing ingredients and phenomenal chefs."

Two local eateries – Fleet at Brunswick Heads and Paper Daisy at the area's most high-profile hotel, the chic Halcyon House in Cabarita Beach – have achieved broad recognition but otherwise, the Tweed's dining experiences lean towards the laidback. Dotted amid the area's rolling hills and forest-fringed fields are inviting country restaurants such as Potager at Carool and Mavis's Kitchen in Uki. A meal here is as

much about the setting – dining on the veranda and watching the ducks taking a shortcut through the herb gardens – as it is about local ingredients.

New foodie destinations are popping up every day. Perched beside a sunflower field at Cudgen, Farm & Co is a place where you can savour a cup of gourmet coffee while picking up fresh-from-the-fields produce. Over at the tiny township of Tumbulgum, Husk Distillery – best known for its purple Ink Gin – will be opening a new distillery from mid-year.

"We have so much to show people," says Harriet Messenger, the company's sales and marketing manager. "Our property has cane, cattle and rainforest; we have built sustainability right through our operations."

Visitors will be able to sample Husk's entire range of spirits, including a new spiced rum made with indigenous ingredients such as wattlesed and native ginger which, says Messenger, "tries to capture our region in a bottle".

Another of the Tweed's key strengths, according to Wright, is culture. The area's



Reconstruction of Margaret Olley's home at Tweed Regional Gallery in Murwillumbah.

cultural flagship is the Tweed Regional Gallery in Murwillumbah, where visitors can inspect a spectacular reconstruction of artist Margaret Olley's home and studio. Its sedimentary layers of artefacts are as exquisitely arranged as one of the artist's still-life paintings. "It took 10 people nine days to catalogue and pack up everything," my guide informs me. The gallery also hosts some remarkable exhibitions, including a recent collection of rarely seen John Olsen paintings from overseas.

But the Tweed's greatest cultural asset, says Wright, is its population. "There are lots of artists doing amazing things," she says. "According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Tweed is home to more creatives per capita than any another other local government area in the country. Events like the Murwillumbah Art Trail [in May] give them a showcase."

Art in the Tweed is about more than admiring the work; it is about connecting with the artists. "If you want to do a plein air painting lesson with a local artist, we can help you with that," Wright says.

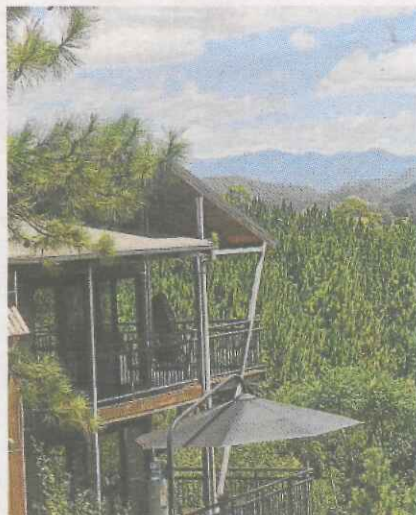
"If you want a private yoga lesson on the beach, we can do that too. We are all about bespoke experiences."

Which leaves only one question: where to stay? For those who enjoy the coastal vibe, Halcyon House, with its super-styled interiors and award-winning restaurant, is the obvious choice. Its new two-storey, six-room spa will only up its appeal.

"We are in a fantastic region, we have a rainforest retreat in front of us and amazing food – only the spa was missing," says Halcyon House's general manager, Mauro de Riso.

If a rainforest retreat is more your style, then try one of the six secluded chalets at ecOasis near Murwillumbah, designed to resemble two-storey tree houses. Watching the sun set from your veranda, surrounded on all sides by rainforest – now that is a natural high. **L&L**

The writer visited the Tweed courtesy of Destination NSW.



From left: the ecOasis retreat looks out to Mount Warning; Halcyon House spa.



Need to know

ecOasis 55 Tatyewan Street, Smiths Creek, Uki, NSW. Tel (02) 6679 5959. Email info@ecoasis.com.au. Rates from 325 a night. For more see ecoasis.com.au

Halcyon House 21 Cypress Crescent, Cabarita Beach, NSW. Tel (02) 6676 1444. Email info@halcyonhouse.com.au. Rates from \$600 a night. For more see halcyonhouse.com.au

Murwillumbah Art Trail May 18 to 27