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WARM UP DOWN UNDER

By the time February—cold, dark, wet February—rolls around, I am longing to be somewhere else, someplace warm. My first choice of destination would be, of course, wine country. But neither Burgundy nor Bordeaux is an improvement on our own gray and bleak climate. Napa Valley is little better, if at all.

No, if you want to get warm and still be in the vineyards you've got to think big. Or, more accurately, you've got to think long, as in voyage. Chile, South Africa and Australia come to mind. My personal favorite

is that last one, specifically one of its loveliest corners: the Margaret River region of western Australia.

I first visited the Margaret River nearly 40 years ago, just before the first vineyards were planted. It was a wild, forested and rural area in those days, a vacation retreat for those of us who lived in Perth, the only metropolitan area for a thousand miles in any direction.

These days there are many more attractions than pristine beaches and forests of Yarra trees, whose wood is so dense it won't float. The forests are still there, but these days the cattle ranches and the potato farms are few and far between. They've been replaced by vineyard after vineyard, each one taking advantage of the warm, dry summers kept temperate by the moderating breezes of the Indian Ocean.

Artists' communities pepper the area, supplying the scores of galleries that offer everything from handicrafts to fine arts; it's all too easy to spend more money than you intended wandering from one beautiful collection to another.

A number of fine restaurants are to be found—some built as part of the nearby wineries, some attached to the area's hotels and B&Bs, and some standalone. All that good wine they produce down there has a way of attracting great food.

Almost without exception the local chefs emphasize local products—excellent produce, fine lamb and abundant seafood. Look especially for the “bugs”—large langoustines that are almost as big—and as sweet—as a small lobster. I order them whenever they're offered.

As to the wines ... there are scores to choose from, and new ones popping up all the time.

The first one established, back in 1967, is still one of the best: Vasse Felix, named after a French sailor who drowned while a member of an exploratory party in the 1800s. They make a full range of delicious wines, from a bubbly to a dessert wine. I particularly enjoy their Bordeaux-style blends and (of course) their Shiraz. The restaurant located in the winery is a great spot to while away a sunny afternoon in the vineyards.

Another personal favorite is Cape

Mentelle. They are notable in a number of ways beyond the fine quality of their wines—especially the whites. The winery was designed to be as environmentally efficient as possible, including the use of rammed-earth construction—a style you'll see frequently in the Margaret River. They also established a better-known sister winery in New Zealand in 1985: Cloudy Bay. Tasting these two cooler-climate wines side by side is fascinating and always tasty.

Another pioneering winery is the Leeuwin Estate. I first fell in love with their Riesling many years ago, back when the idea of fine wines from western Australia was little more than a joke. Today their “Artist Series” wines command high prices around the world, and rightfully so. They also have an award-winning restaurant on-site.

The Cullen Wines are another name to look for—elegant, complex wines with great finesse, especially the Chardonnay. This family-owned winery was one of the earliest in the area, another sheep and cattle ranch turned slowly over to vineyards, not to mention organic gardens that supply most of what the winery restaurant serves. Yes, that's another recommendation for lunch.

I could go on and on about the wines, and the region, for very much longer than I'm allowed here. I could recommend Brookland Valley, Frankland Estate and Howard Park, and so many more—but you get the idea. It really is a garden spot, made even more attractive to people like us by offering plenty of exciting food and wine. I wish I was there right now, but I said that before.

It's a lo-o-o-ng way down there, though well worth the journey. But if you can't make the trip, take a little time to explore the wines. They're not easy to find around here, but are well worth the effort.

HALF-PRICE WINE NIGHTS

Tuesdays, 5:30-9 p.m.

Enjoy a great bottle of wine for half-price with dinner every Tuesday night in Polaris (some restrictions apply). If you have ever wanted to try a new wine, this is a great night to do so! Please call 637-4608 to make reservations.