

TRAVELLER

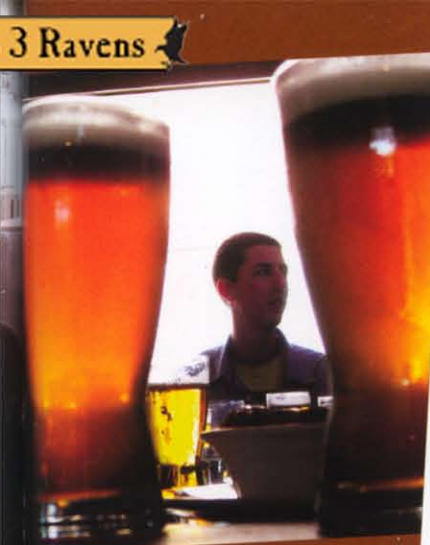
Brewery Tour



Back to 3 Ravens



Homebrew heaven: a tour of the brewer prompts many "I need a bigger shed" ideas

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Brewery Tour



JOIN THE SCRUFFY BUNCH

Wine tours have long been a staple of the tourism scene. Now a new industry conducting brewery tours is springing up. **Andrea Petrie** joins the boys from Scruffy Bunch Tours to see whether beer and bus trips can work.

When you are told minutes after entering your first brewery that your tour group will be the first to sample its new American pale ale, you know you are on a winner. And moments later, after an impressive imperial stout that is yet to be released to the masses hits your palate, you momentarily pinch yourself to make sure you haven't died and gone to beer-lover's heaven.

It is a Saturday morning and 11 of us — men and women of varying ages and levels of interest in beer — have embarked on a VIP tour of some of Victoria's best independent microbreweries.

Our host is Scruffy Bunch Tours, a small tourism company established two years ago by wine and craft beer enthusiasts Don Pople and Greg Cuthbert.

The company added microbrewery tours to its schedule six months ago to support an industry that, although still in its infancy in Victoria, is certainly gaining momentum.

"We are keen to provide a key link to both visitors to Victoria and locals who want to know more about how, where and who is brewing the craft beers they are now embracing so keenly," Cuthbert explains.

We assemble at Beer DeLuxe at Melbourne's Federation Square at 9.30am and climb into a mini van for the laid-back, chauffeur-driven expedition.

Our first stop is the acclaimed 3 Ravens Brewing Company in Thornbury, which we are told was the creation of five engineers who decided to scale back their stressful workloads in 2003 and do something about the diminishing availability of their favourite hand-pumped English ales at their local pub.

Their solution was to build a microbrewery in the factory below their multi-million dollar engineering business. What began as a hobby has since become a thriving craft beer business.

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Brewer Marcus Cox pours a few frothies and details each brew's international ingredients, preparation, taste and accolades. As he talks, we taste the selection that includes an English ale, Belgian witbier, blond altbier, black stout and the newest addition to mark the brewery's fifth birthday, an American pale ale.

He then walks us step-by-step through a fantasyland for the homebrewer — massive stainless steel mash tuns, kettles and fermenters — where they brew 1,200 litres of beer at a time. The homebrewers among

the group gasp when we are told they bottle by hand!

Coldstream Brewery in the Yarra Valley is our next stop. The former wool depot has been transformed into a high-quality restaurant and bar with a brewery at the rear. Showing us around is Rod Williams, who has more than 15 years' brewing experience in the UK.

Williams's expansive brewing knowledge combined with his unwavering enthusiasm for beer becomes evident as he takes us on

a comprehensive tour of the brew house. When it's time for a sample, he assumes the role of a proud father as he awaits our reactions to his pilsner.

But Coldstream Brewery is gaining notoriety for something a little more unorthodox for boutique breweries in Australia — its draught cider. Hand-crafted from a locally-grown blend of Granny Smith, Jonathan, Pink Lady and Gala apples using a rack and cloth cider press, the cider is dangerously tasty. What could become Coldstream's best creation yet, however,

is its recently released bitter, brewed with premium quality English malting barley and hopped with Fuggles and East Kent Goldings. When it's time for us to choose two beers to drink over our cooked-to-perfection lunch, our appreciation for the bitter shows. Almost everyone orders it — some people twice — before it's time for us to continue on to one of the Yarra Valley's newest assets, the Hargreaves Hill Brewing Company in Yarra Glen.

The family-owned and operated microbrewery was set up by classical pianist Simon Walkenhorst and his opera-singer wife Beth Williams as an alternative

to making a living from teaching music and performing.

After returning from a trip around Britain's finest beer country, they pooled their money and set up a brewing plant on Williams' parents farm at nearby Steels Creek.

A few years later they released their first brew, Hargreaves Hill Pale, in 2004. They have since added a hefeweizen Bavarian-style ale, a roasty coffee-accented porter, a Celtic red ale, a tasty ESB and an abbey dubbel to the list. An innovative tasting boat featuring all six is the best way to sample each one, as we discovered.

Walkenhorst, who is an international beer judge and the current president of the Victorian Association of Microbrewers, explains that they rely on 50,000-litre rainwater tanks for their ales, of which they brew several batches a week at their 400-litre off-site plant.

We sit around discussing our favourites of the day until it's time to pile back onto the bus where an Esky full of cleansing bottled water awaits us for the journey back to the CBD. ☑

For more information on the tours available check out: www.scruffybunch.com.au.