



Vale culture feeds body and soul

I RECENTLY had the pleasure of taking some old friends from New Zealand around my region, giving them a 'this is my life' tour – starting from when I first arrived in McLaren Vale 30 years ago.

Back then, there was one restaurant and a pizza bar with the only cappuccino machine in the district.

The region's unspoilt rural landscape, nestled in the Willunga Basin, is surrounded by amazing physical features that overwhelm the senses.

No wonder I decided to make it my home – I had arrived in an earthly paradise. But I wasn't stepping into a pristine, virgin landscape. There were plenty before me who had laid claim – the Kaurna people have a significant dreaming with the area, and settlers began arriving around 1850 – building, mining slate, farming and creating communities.

When I arrived in the early 80s, the flourishing wine industry supported around 50 wineries and cellar doors, but from a visitor's point of view, there was little evidence of a food culture that could be easily accessed.

There were, however, operating dairies, stone-fruit orchards and a significant almond industry. Olive groves had also been a feature of the landscape since settlement and a renaissance of this industry was just beginning.

Some of the best barley and wheat grown in Australia used to be shipped out to the world from Port Willunga, and even now fields of wheat and barley can be seen on the coastal hill plains.

So with all these wonderful ingredients, it is no wonder this region developed a vibrant, modern and creative food culture – complementing not only the wine industry, but also the land-

scape that plays host to us all.

It was the collective creative vision of a hedonistic crew of entrepreneurs that helped bring this cultural change about. They have built on what went before and will leave opportunities to those who come next. As a region with a reputation for good hospitality, it will continue to welcome those who are prepared to invest in its future respectfully.

My NZ friends and I ate in as many places as we could in the time available. Everywhere we went, the food was fresh and fabulous, with menus proudly reflecting the extraordinary diversity of local produce – much of which is now available throughout the region at the local farmers' market, providores and farm gates.

The Willunga Farmers Market has definitely played its part in helping to develop the region's reputation as one of the best food regions in Australia, but so has the vision and hard work of all those people who planted, picked and pickled olives, opened restaurants, planted orchards, vines and strawberry patches and who milked from dawn 'til dusk.

Many of us who first came to play ended up staying. I'm so happy I did. This region feeds the body and soul. It's the reason many of us continue to fight tooth-and-nail to make sure this little piece of paradise continues to feed many more souls into the future. Its inherent value to the State is immeasurable and it will continue to rise the more the region is protected.

The holiday season is almost here and I know we'll welcome many visitors in the coming months. Make sure you make it for a sunset picnic of local plonk and produce, picked and purchased from paradise. We have much to be grateful for. Merry Christmas.