



WORDS TRACY RENKIN

It's the talk of the town. Quaint, historic Richmond now with executive accommodation at \$1500 a night. That's about seven times as much as most of the other nearby accommodation options. "There's been a lot of stories going around about the price point," says Kat Little, who runs the Stone & Barrow cafe in Bridge Street. "There's been speculation over what the price point might actually be. There's a lot of talk about that — a room in Richmond at \$1000-plus a night — can you imagine?"

In terms of visitor numbers, Richmond, with its impressive collection of historic Georgian buildings, gets fewer visitors than Mona but more than Port Arthur. In fact, one in every five tourists who come to Tasmania stop by the pretty and historic town, and the nine Coal River Valley vineyards on the way.

At the entrance to the village are two magnificent, Georgian-style homes, one on each side of the road, built by convicts, two years apart in the early 1830s.

On the right is the sandstone beauty Belmont House, home to Libby and John Pooley for the past 15 years. They run their Pooley Wines cellar door from the property. A little more than a year ago they bought the property on the left — Prospect House — and have since been overseeing its restoration into what is now the most expensive place to stay in town.

Prospect House opened for business on Thursday. There are two premium suites available with private bathrooms and a joint

sitting room inside the actual house (\$1500 a night for the whole suite), and a mix of 10 more queen and king rooms in the refurbished original stable block which start at \$900 a night. The price includes all meals including afternoon tea, wine and mini bar. The luxury restaurant will occasionally be open to the public.

Guests at the nearby national-award winning Loft Over the Vines bed and breakfast, on the way into Richmond, pay

\$160 a night. Its owner Natasha Cuthbertson says even though she drives past Prospect House at least four times a week she still looks back over her shoulder and cranes her neck to get a better sticky beak at the old, grand building.

Its beauty and charm, she says, isn't lost on the locals. One in five Richmond residents showed up to the recent open day to take a peek at its transformation. "Every time you drive by it just catches your eye," she says. "It's got that wow factor. It's such an impressive and stunning property. I think it will do really well."

A year ago Loft Over the Vines won a national Stayz award for Most Valuable Property. But after forking out \$2 million in repairs to Prospect House (in addition to the \$3 million purchase price) John Pooley says failure — for what is now arguably Richmond's most valuable property — is not an option.

"There is excitement and challenge and risk," says the 76-year-old, who only last year gave up amateur car racing. "But this will be successful because we will do whatever it takes to make it successful."

Looking out through the original front doors of Prospect House and over the rows of weeping cherry trees is the Pooley's picturesque Butcher Hill Vineyard. Convicts cut sandstone from that same hill to not just build Belmont House but the fancy



How green is my valley

Libby and John Pooley are among the longest-established winegrowers in the Coal River Valley. Now they have branched out on their most ambitious enterprise yet — turning Prospect House into a super-exclusive retreat

bridge in the village that's now the oldest in the nation and the town's biggest drawcard. Every morning John's wife Libby walks their two border collies over the black crackling clays and past the vines to the top of that hill. "When I come down," she says, "it's just so lovely looking out across the vineyard and seeing Prospect House."

She says even though it's been a dream of theirs for some time, she still can't quite believe the house is now theirs. The stable block was the biggest renovation project the pair has done. Libby oversaw the task of interior decorating Prospect House, which she describes as an eclectic mix of old and new.

"We had a ball actually," she says, "looking for bits and pieces to fill gaps and holes in the place."

A restoration of such an old home has its ups and downs. On the day of the media launch the Pooleys discovered something to be added to the staff etiquette list: if they are chatting down in the cellar, everything they say can be easily heard upstairs in the guest lounge.

The Pooleys ended up spending twice as much money on the refurbishment and repairs than they originally thought they would. Many of the features that make the home so grand were the very things that had to be restored.

The plinths at the base of the pillars on the front porch were unstable; a large, sandstone wall was knocked down and then built up again so the old wrought iron gates would close; the original sandstone pavers on the front porch were all lifted,



Clockwise from main: Libby and John Pooley in front of their new business venture, Prospect House; the elegant formal dining room; one of the sitting rooms; Georgian splendour; the infamous cannonball; classic style throughout; the cellar door at Richmond.

Pictures: PATRICK GEE, LUKE BOWDEN



numbered and then re-laid so that a foundation could be built on the original dirt base; and the "horrible, crumbly and rotten" bridge leading onto the property was also replaced.

But its age also brings little snippets of historical joy, like the cute, original bread oven in the shared breakfast kitchen that sits opposite the modern and monstrous coffee machine, and the matching wooden arches in the entryway that are identical in both houses.

Many of the furniture pieces were picked up locally at Longford and New Norfolk and Sorell — but there's also special family pieces scattered around the place, too. The English oak dresser in the bar is 100 years old and was shipped over when the Pooleys emigrated from London in 1952. John's mother Margaret's favourite chair has been recovered to match the drapes and is sitting by the fireplace in the guests' shared lounge. Margaret was an icon in the wine industry, John says, and he fondly remembers when she was still running their cellar door at 92.

Perched on the top of the mantle over the fireplace in that same room is a very charred cannonball sitting under a glass dome. Its origin is a source of tall tales and local myth, says John. The cannonball had been collecting dust on a little round table down in the cellar for the past 50 years.



"Back in the old days, apparently," he says over a glass of bubbles at the kitchen table, "there were two retired colonels — one at Prospect House and one at Belmont. At 6pm the one at Prospect House would fire a cannon with gunpowder — to let the other know it was time to take the cork out of a bottle of whisky. For a dare, youths from the village tried to steal it, but they wanted to try it out first. They put too much gunpowder in and the whole thing blew up."

It was the hotel manager's idea to pop the ball underneath the dome for guests to discover. Patrick Rodgers, who cut his teeth at the opening of Mona and then later spent three years at Saffire, says Prospect House will have a number of explorative

pieces like the cannonball to showcase, which will create some moments of "awe and wonder" for their well-heeled guests.

The 9ha property with a half dozen 100-year-old oak trees and a beautiful formal cottage garden surrounding a new sandstone courtyard will appeal to top-end tourists, Rodgers says — like Pooley Wine's 1500 wine club members.

Guests will be able to choose where they dine. They will be able to sit near the lake, under an oak tree, on the terrace or in the courtyard, or choose between more formal sitting areas. Rodgers is expecting the kind of guests — probably international — who will fly in by chopper. They may stay for a few days with them in Richmond, he says, before flying up to Saffire at Freycinet, or Pumphouse Point at Lake St Clair.

"While we will look after guests here who are after complete escapism, we will also cater for those who want to immerse themselves in the heritage and culture of the place," Rodgers says. "We are in the middle of wine country, so we will be encouraging our guests to get on a bike and explore Richmond and go across the road for a Pooley wine tour. We'll be showcasing the wonderful produce from the Coal River Valley and leaving them with lasting moments of reflection and memories of being very well looked after."

Family friend, the Premier Will Hodgman — who was baby-sat as a child by Libby's older sister — officially re-opened Prospect House earlier this month. He described the refurbishment of Prospect House as Tasmania's "latest and greatest offering".

Hodgman says one in four visitors to Tasmania come for a gourmet tourism experience and want to sample the best of our food, wine and heritage — the perfect target market for Prospect House. He praised the attention to detail the Pooleys had gone to in restoring the property to its former glory.

"Tasmania's really taken our tourism experiences to the next level," Hodgman says. "And there's no better example of that than this extraordinary refurbishment in what is an iconic building and property, and one which now has a new lease of life." ●



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