

MY TOWN

MILDURA

Blessed with warm days, citrus and spirited locals – and that's just for starters – Mildura is paradise to the people who call the Victorian river city home. By **Susan Horsburgh**. Photography by Lauren Southwell.



MARIO MAMMONE

TOUR GUIDE

"I came to Australia in the '70s. I've got a sister here so Mildura was easy for me – I had a place to stay and plenty of work picking oranges, grapes and watermelons on the farms. That's where I met my wife, Maria; I got friendly with my boss, Charlie, and then I got even friendlier with his daughter!

I learnt English, found a job at Mildura Base Hospital and stayed for 22 years. I was a cleaner and ended up being the environmental services manager with about 70 staff but then I got sick of it. I've always loved citrus so we bought the Orange World tourism business 16 years ago.

It's a fully operational 20-hectare farm that grows citrus fruit – oranges, mandarins, lemons, grapefruit, limes and tangelos – as well as avocados. My brother-in-law looks after the farming and we take care of the tourism. Maria and I entertain people on the tractor-train tours around the orchard; we get up to 20,000 visitors a year. They can also climb into our [model] 'orange' and take a photo, with their head, feet and arms poking through the holes. It must be the most popular orange in Australia!

Mildura is a big citrus-growing area. First of all, we are blessed with the mighty Murray River. And the weather is ideal; we've got the sunshine all year round and in winter we've got the frosts – that's what puts the sugar in the fruit. We grow navels in the cold months and Valencias during the summertime.

The local people are what make Mildura. When I arrived, there were some fish-and-chip shops and now it's become multicultural, with restaurants and markets. The town is buzzing from morning to night."





ANTHONY MURPHY

WINEMAKER

"My family has been growing grapes in Mildura since 1909 and I became interested in winemaking when I was 16. I started working at Mildara Wines in 1975. Back then, there were 120 wineries in Australia and now there are thousands.

That was back in the day when Lindeman's started producing Ben Ean moselle. Remember Black Tower? Blue Nun? It was the start of the wine-drinking culture. People started to choose white wine, whereas before it was always red and fortifieds.

When I started out, you just couldn't afford to make any bad wine so it was very scientific; a lot of attention to detail, a lot of chemistry. Now, you can almost kick a bush and a winemaker pops out. There's more myth and magic, more spin on everything. It's all about the story behind the grape-growing and winemaking.

Dad bought the property here in Trentham Cliffs – 15 minutes' drive from Mildura – in 1960 and my brother, Patrick, and I started Trentham Estate winery in 1988. People thought we were mad. I could see the potential of a cellar-door restaurant right on the banks of the Murray – it overlooks the lawns that go right down to the river and it's such a beautiful site. We have lots of weddings here and people in houseboats can just pull up and have lunch.

I don't think Mildura has changed that much. It's still a country town but with good facilities. You can jump on a plane from Melbourne and be here in one hour then on the river the next hour. You can go camping out in the bush and it's so isolated. This is the outback really and just a beautiful part of the world."

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ANIKA WALKER

PERSONAL STYLIST

"I grew up a city girl but my husband, David, was raised in Mildura. We met when we were 20 and married eight years later. I had this romantic idea of escaping the city so we moved to the farm in 2010. We now have three kids and my husband and his brother have taken over the family business, Manna Farms, which grows organic, biodynamic almonds, citrus and avocados.

I studied fine art, majoring in sculpture, and wanted to be a photographer. Then I met some stylists and thought, 'This is hands-on and three-dimensional.' I also worked in retail and loved dressing people. Back then, around 2005, there was that TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and [British stylists] Trinny and Susannah but there were no styling schools so I learnt the ropes as I went. I started my business, Your Look, in Melbourne in 2007 before I came to Mildura.

Styling is so satisfying but it can also be daunting because clients are hoping for an amazing result that will build their confidence. Most are working mums and many have been through changes when it comes to body shape, career or sometimes a marriage break-up. We're not just trying to make them look nice; it's about building knowledge so when they're shopping or getting dressed every morning, they know how to do it themselves. We look at body shape, colouring, lifestyle and budget and bring it all together.

I moved to Mildura thinking my work would remain in Melbourne and I'd have to commute but the business has grown through word of mouth. The town's got stores such as Witchery and Sportsgirl but also boutiques offering all sorts of brands. When I moved here, Mildura was more casual but social media and online shopping have given people the opportunity to be on trend.

I employ two stylists in Melbourne and now I'm commuting just once a month. I'm a freelance fashion editor for *Mildura Living Magazine* and I work with the racing club. For the Mildura Cup [27-28 July], I'm emceeing and styling the ladies' luncheon marquee.

Mildura is booming and the food scene is phenomenal with awesome pop-up cafés dotted along the riverfront. There are lots of things to do but it's also about hanging out and just enjoying the good things in life – shopping, food and wine."





MOHAMMAD QASIMI

SOCCER COACH

"I was born in Afghanistan but my parents moved to Pakistan when I was two years old because of the Taliban. We were refugees there but not in a camp – we were living in Quetta.

Around 2014 and '15 was the worst part of my life. There were targeted killings and bomb blasts and you never felt safe. There was a blast outside a shop and my mum and sisters were inside. If it's just you, it's okay but when your sisters are going to school and your mum is going out, that is the worst feeling – you don't know if they will come back.

My dad came here first. He was in an Indonesian refugee camp for three-and-a-half years before the Australian immigration department accepted his application. He moved to Mildura and, after two-and-a-half years, he sponsored us. We arrived in September 2015, when I was 19. We were separated from him for six years. When we got to Australia, it was the happiest thing that had ever happened – the most beautiful and exciting.

The idea was to find an easy place to start a new life. In Mildura, he found the ideal place. It's like paradise – you're not scared of going out. My dad kept telling us, 'You are safe, you can go to the park.' People care about you here and are happy to help you out.

There are many Afghans in Mildura; 55 to 60 families. We get together twice a week to celebrate something or just visit each other. There are many ethnic groups in Mildura. I'm a community guide and bilingual support worker at Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council so I look after new refugee arrivals.

I love cricket but my three younger sisters love soccer so I got involved to support them and now I'm a coach! I hope I'll play cricket for Australia one day and buy a big house for my family.

It is 100 per cent different here. You can't call the life [we had] in Pakistan a life – you have no hope, no future. Mildura and Australia – it *is* life. In this town, you can do whatever you want to do and go wherever you want to go. No-one will stop you and ask what you are doing. You can make your dreams happen."

"Les Murray was taken on a run around town and the next thing you knew, he'd written a suite of poems."

DONATA CARRAZZA

FESTIVAL CHAIR AND RESTAURATEUR

"My grandfather migrated to Mildura in the early '50s like a lot of postwar Europeans did. He bought land to grow grapes on the Murray and he'd travel to Melbourne weekly during harvest to sell them to Italians and Greeks who wanted to make wine. My dad [Don Carrazza] got a job as a porter at Mildura's most famous hotel, the Grand, when he was 16. Thirty-three years later, he bought it.

I left Mildura when I was 15 to go to boarding school. I was pretty happy about that because it was a small town with a small-town mentality and I didn't appreciate the things I do now. I studied at the University of Melbourne and went to Italy for a year in '88. When I returned, I met my husband, Stefano de Pieri, who migrated from Italy as a 19-year-old and has been here since the '70s.

When Stefano and I moved to Mildura in 1991, it felt like a cultural wasteland. Stefano had a good friend, Philip Hodgins, who was a poet and he asked him to come up and do a reading. We were running Stefano's Restaurant [now called Stefano's Cantina] at the Grand Hotel and we thought we'd get maybe 20 people [for the reading] – we ended up with 80. Everyone was just so excited. Philip knew people like [poet] Les Murray and [author] Helen Garner and he said he'd see if we could put something together. So the first Mildura Writers' Festival was held in March 1995.

This year [19-22 July], we have writers such as David Malouf and Robyn Davidson, who wrote *Tracks*. Tim Winton was a guest one year. He's a modest, lovely guy and he was placed in the Presidential Suite at the Grand. He just walked in and said, 'Whoa! You could fit a footy team in here!' Les Murray has made the trip here often. One time, he was taken on a run around town and the next thing you knew, he'd written a suite of poems about the river, going to the asparagus farm and staying at the Grand Hotel.

In the past 25 years or so, Mildura has been totally transformed. There's a strong coffee culture, we've got our own gin distillery, a brewery in the CBD and small winemakers doing really interesting things. It's not the place I grew up in." ●

