

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Exploring Victoria – without leaving home

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Sally Lynch sets a cracking pace as we tour Old Beechworth Gaol, the odd passer-by offering a cheery “hello” in the courtyard. In busier times, visitors would be lining up for locally roasted coffee at the gleaming silver Airstream caravan prettily parked between the high granite walls topped with razor wire. A popular tourist attraction here in gold rush country, the jail was once home to the likes of Chopper Read, Ned Kelly and his mum Ellen; these days it harbours about 20 small businesses including Tour De Vines cycling adventures and Sally’s cooking school The Big House.

Our tour ends with a peek at the inmates’ outdoor pool (it hasn’t been disturbed, Sally thinks, because of the hanged bodies thought to be buried next to it), and then it’s back to her kitchen, a stone’s throw from the old gallows, to make Tom Kha Gai. As we slice galangal and kaffir lime leaves for the Thai soup, Sally showing me how to twist lemongrass into a knot for the pot, I ask: isn’t it unnerving working here? As time goes by, she says, she has wondered if there isn’t “something about the place”, which saw its last inmates in 2004. But prison stories and whispers of the paranormal are good fodder for the cooking classes, especially when they can be held in person...

With a clatter, my phone falls off its precarious perch in my Sydney kitchen, and I lose Sally just as she’s about to show me how to add a dollop of roasted chilli paste and a squeeze of lime to my serving bowls before ladling in the soup. Back online, she laughs as I wipe coconut milk off my screen. “Moving to Zoom has been a good lesson in how to pare it back,” she says, “and this soup is quick and easy.” She’s adding tofu to hers; I’m going for sliced chicken breast. Don’t be intimidated by the hot/sour/salty/sweet balancing act, she adds. Just add chilli, lime, fish sauce or sugar to taste: “There’s no right or wrong.”

Be brave, make do but think creatively: it’s a mantra that perfectly describes the hospitality and tourism industry’s efforts to survive 2020. Through winter, businesses large and small have been

Zooming, Instagramming, virtual eventing, pivoting and posting for their lives, in many cases just to keep their brand top of mind. Sally, who has now restarted onsite cooking classes, says that even with the dampening effect of border closures, there's a vibe that "regional tourism is about to go through the roof". In the meantime, here's something for your little black book of Must Do In 2021(ish) holidays.

Jackie and Mick Parsons of Hedonistic Hiking, who like Sally have hitched their wagon to the "High Country at Home" initiative, are counting on arborio rice and a nice drop of local wine to get their message out: "Can't get to Victoria just yet? Why not join our online Risotto Done Right for a virtual dinner." I do just that on a Friday night, prepped with a big box of goodies sent by the Parsons as part of the \$165 ticket: Billy Button wines (arneis for the risotto, barbera for the chef), Woodland gourmet mushrooms from Milawa, Gamila saffron from Beechworth...

But: hiking and risotto? Mick explains that one of their guided hikes takes in Piedmont, Italy – the recipe is from a chef he met there and adapts perfectly to the produce of north-east Victoria. Like Tom Kha Gai and probably like hiking, risotto is reasonably foolproof if you're well prepped with quality gear and pay attention. My virtual classmates are couples from Melbourne and regional Victoria; we chop and stir and taste and sip, taking a break while Jackie shows us around the two-bedroom Art House Townhouse, one in a row of five schmick new properties for holiday letting in the heart of Bright, another pretty town in the High Country.

This time of year, the Parsons would normally be in Europe. The extra months in Australia have, however, allowed them to develop more guided adventures in Victoria, ranging from day-long walks (from \$110 per person) to the six-night Great Ocean Walk (from \$3050).

There are silver linings to be found, if you look for them. And Victoria in springtime? While Sally Lynch isn't the only one who's had quite enough of travel restrictions, right now she wouldn't be anywhere else than Beechworth. "It's pretty nice here," she reports from jail.

## **Virtually VIC**

### **High Country at Home**

Interactive experiences include gnocchi making (Katrina Pizzini, King Valley) and coffee and wine appreciation (Ben Ryder and Raquel Jones, Beechworth). [victoriashighcountry.com.au](http://victoriashighcountry.com.au)