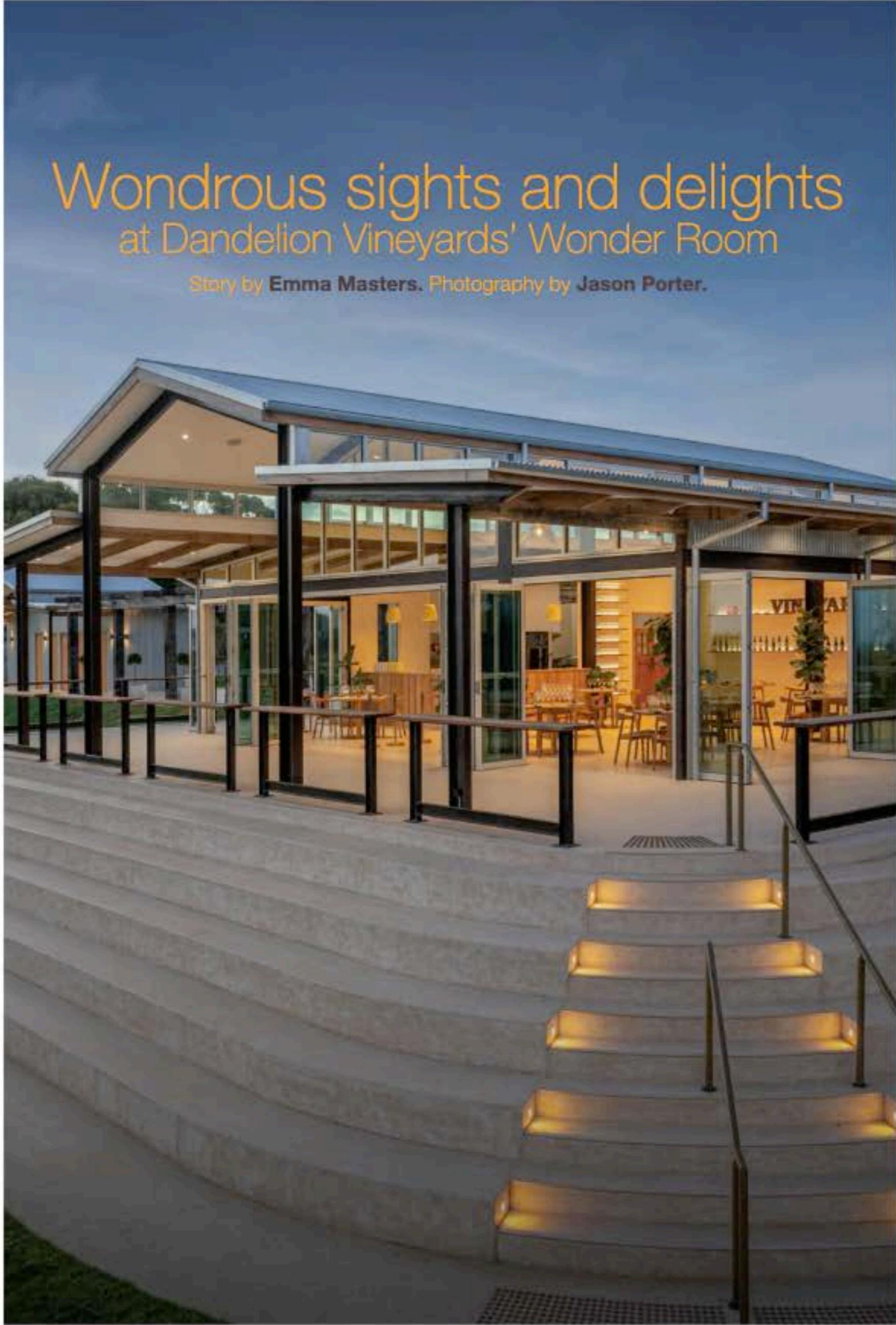


# Wondrous sights and delights at Dandelion Vineyards' Wonder Room

Story by **Emma Masters**. Photography by **Jason Porter**.



Page left and above: The 'Wonder Room' at Dandelion Vineyards. The large open plan space has been designed to take in the spectacular vineyard views.

It's impossible not to catch your breath when you first take in the phenomenal view over Dandelion Vineyards' Firehawk Farm. One's gaze rolls down into the vineyard's valley, capturing an expansive patchwork of McLaren Vale vines. To the south-east are sweeping views of the peninsula, and to the west its sparkling seas.

It's easy to see why this site, which was once home to an old tractor shed, has been reimagined and transformed into a new state-of-the-art space designed to showcase the region in all its glory, complemented by outstanding wine and mouth-watering morsels. Standing proudly at the top of the hill is the *pièce de résistance* of Dandelion Vineyards – the Wonder Room. As its name suggests the building is awe-inspiring, with ceilings held aloft by raw steel beams and drop windows that flood the main room and kitchen with light and the impressive vista.

Step outside and there are more vantage points to enjoy tastings and the sights: under a patio, or perching on the expansive colosseum steps, or while relaxing on the lawn.

It's no surprise that behind this exciting new 'must do' wine experience in McLaren Vale is a couple of seasoned aficionados. The pair, who grew up in the industry, but on opposite sides of the globe, came together through their shared love of good wine.

Elena Brooks and her husband and co-owner Zar both started in the wine industry at a young age. 'I come from a very big wine region in Bulgaria, the whole winery was like a town. Five hundred people worked on site. It had its own library, its own choir, doctor, dentist and even its own in-house artists, and Mum worked for the winery as a marketer,' Elena explains.

'I began to learn English at about eleven and started to help Mum with all the visitors and tourists. So I learned about wine very quickly. We didn't have a legal drinking age either, so I could work with wine, pour wine, talk about wine and even try the wine.'

When Elena decided she wanted to pursue a career in the industry, she was told to look to Adelaide which offered 'the best winemaking course in the world' and at age nineteen, she had arrived. >



Top: The well-appointed complex with impressive wraparound white steps ascend to the cellar door. Bottom: Award-winning winemaker, Elena Brooks. Page right: The tasting experience at Dandelion will be front and centre of the Wonder Room experience.

'I was lucky to come to Australia and start making wine at a time when people were hungry for something different, you know, people in Australia have a very high knowledge of wine compared to the rest of the world,' she says.

Elena gravitated towards McLaren Vale. 'It was always welcoming, I never felt like an outsider and you're allowed to be different and come with new ideas and you're celebrated for it,' she says. 'We have tradition, but everyone's more than happy for new innovation as well.' As Elena began to make her mark she met Zar Brooks, who was renowned for his work in wine marketing. Soon after, Dandelion Vineyards was born and so was the couple's first child. 'The entire company grew around me being a mum with a young child, and then everyone that came to work with us was the same – all mums with small children,' she says. 'The office was like a creche

and I think for that reason, we're still really close friends.' Dandelion is in every way a family business. The employees' families all have experience in the industry, and have also played an integral role in its development. 'We're also from many different countries: we've got two Bulgarians, a Maltese, a Russian, Ukrainian/Canadian, and a few token Australians,' Elena winks.

From the beginning, Dandelion set a high benchmark. 'The idea was to have different style wines that represented a more mature taste of Australian wine,' says Elena. 'Wines that weren't compared just to Australian wines, but were on the world stage as well.'

Elena and Zar's search for the 'cream of the crop' took them to other regions.

'What Zar likes to call "wines of terra", which speak to where they came from, and probably the reason we make so many is that our >





Page left: Delicious offerings to complement the wine tasting experience (top), expertly crafted by Chef Chris Bone (bottom left) and focusing on fresh local ingredients. This page top and below left: Be welcomed by friendly front-of-house staff rich with wine knowledge. Bottom right: Appreciate the 'wines of terra' from select vineyards around South Australia.

wines capture the vineyard and the land it comes from,' Elena says. 'As a winemaker, I like to think I do very little because I encourage the place itself to talk. For example, our Wonderland Eden Valley Riesling is such a unique vineyard that's over 110 years of age, so it captures history and it captures our time, and it's a very aspirational wine that tells a story. Our home is McLaren Vale, because we wouldn't live anywhere else, but we also make a lot of wines from The Barossa, Eden Valley and Adelaide Hills, Finnis and all the way to Coonawarra.'

Their focus has paid off. From their first release in 2007, Dandelion Vineyards has achieved critical acclaim, with a swag of international and national awards – and also key local ones. In 2021, Elena and Zar

were crowned McLaren Vale Wine Show's Bushing Queen and King, as the winemakers of 'Best Wine of Show.' And as word has spread, they've continued to grow, selling to more than forty markets worldwide.

The Wonder Room is the next step, providing a base for visitors to experience their wines, alongside offerings designed by one of the Fleurieu's most innovative chefs, Chris Bone. Known as a champion of seasonal foods and natural cooking, Chef Bone has been given free reign to create a selection of accompanying plates that elevate food as an integral part of the tasting experience. 'In our culture in Bulgaria, when you go to someone's house or a restaurant, you get food first,' says Elena. 'Dandelion Vineyards >



Top: Be at the cellar door for some of the most spectacular sunsets in the Vale. Bottom left: The path to one of the newest wine tasting experiences in the Vale. It will not disappoint. Right: Custom-made tableware made just for the Wonder Room by local potter, 'Nicole is Nicole' ceramics.

was created around food, so it was always going to be part of the experience of coming here. The food is part of the tasting and it will be literally up to the chef on the day and what's growing at the time. And it won't be a little bit of food, but it won't be a lot either. We want people to finish their tastings and still go out for lunch, because we don't want to take away from all the great restaurants the Vale has.' Elena's Bulgarian heritage will also naturally come into the mix, with ingredients inspired by her mother Dani's flourishing market garden, which is a stone's throw from the Wonder Room. 'We love using ingredients from the garden and while it might not deliver enough produce for what we need, what I love is that it shows

you what is actually growing well and what is seasonal. It's a guide,' she says. Guests can visit the garden, along with other special areas at Firehawk Farm. 'We've got a lookout about five minutes from the Wonder Room that takes in the entire ocean, a beautiful big oak tree where you can have a picnic and there's a little forest beside the shiraz vineyard,' Elena explains. 'There's many places to enjoy, and we encourage people to explore, to walk through and to have fun.' Dandelion Vineyards lives up to its name in more ways than one. It's a place where you dare to believe wishes could indeed be granted on a single breath of wind. 



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