

## escape

## Treats from the food bowl trail



She's apples: Some freshly picked fruit at a Bilpin orchard

A few hours exploring the Hawkesbury proved fruitful for **Briar Jensen**.

**MUNCHING** on a crisp, sweet gala, I amble further into the apple orchard, the sunshine between the trees warm on my skin.

Bellbirds are whistling in the distance as I pluck another apple for my basket. If only shopping was always like this.

I'm in Shields' Orchard at Bilpin, one of the properties on the Hawkesbury Harvest Farm Gate Trail. Long known as Sydney's food bowl, the fertile alluvial plains flanking the Hawkesbury River have provided fresh produce to the city — at first transported by river and sea — since early colonial times. Today, the area's agricultural production is estimated at \$502 million a year.

As I pay Bill Shields for my freshly picked produce — and a jar of his wife's home-made peach and mango jam — Janice Hart of Hawkesbury Sightseeing Tours packs the goods into her 4WD, but leaves enough room for the vegetables we're yet to buy.

Along with two women from Singapore, I'm on one of Janice's personalised driving tours of the Hawkesbury region, where she has lived for 23 years. We're on a combined farm gate, history and art and craft tour.

Janice collected the other two



Signs of sweetness: Shields' Orchard at Bilpin

women from Glebe, but I chose to join them en-route.

Janice presents me with a bag filled with information on the area, a bottle of water and a gorgeous little bear in a box. (She's a bear addict from way back.)

Our first stop is Balanced Essentials, on a 20ha bush block at Glenorie, where proprietor Cheryl Gilbert inspires us about her aromatherapy and natural healing products, several of which are listed as therapeutic goods.

We take morning tea in the garden, soon to be surrounded by lavender fields, before departing with a calico bag of samples.

Janice drives us through the bush-clad sandstone hills of south Maroota, before heading along country roads flanked by hills blushing green from recent rain.

We pass Pitt Town, Windsor and Richmond, three of the five "Macquarie towns" established by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1810, the others being Wilberforce



**Colonial connection:** The Macquarie Arms Hotel has been a popular watering hole at Windsor since 1815

and Castlereagh. Janice highlights the history of each. At Windsor's Macquarie Arms Hotel, she points out the level of the great 1867 flood, marked part-way up the wall: an astonishing 12m above the deck of the nearby river bridge.

We drive past orchards, berry farms, nurseries and grass farms; we glimpse donkeys, alpacas and cattle whose breeds I don't recognise.

Dilapidated farmhouses and rusty iron sheds contrast with immaculate horse studs and

hobby farms. Crepe myrtles in every hue of pink and lilac brighten country gardens while huge spreading trees provide shade. There are tiny museums dedicated to the likes of radios and opals, and a quaint little white weatherboard post office.

After visiting Shields' Orchard, we stop at Kurrajong for lunch at Sassafras Creek. We dine in the light and airy gallery, where floor-to-ceiling windows provide a stunning panorama of the Hawkesbury plains below.

The restaurant focuses on us-

ing fresh local produce for their modern Australian menu, and while I'm tempted by the salt and pepper squid, I settle for a delicious salad of char-grilled peaches on a bed of rocket.

There's just time to browse the craft shop before deafening thunder sends us scuttling back to the car.

During a quick visit with artist Yvonne West, we sip tea from dainty, floral china cups while looking around her Richmond studio. I leave with a selection of note cards featuring pen-and-

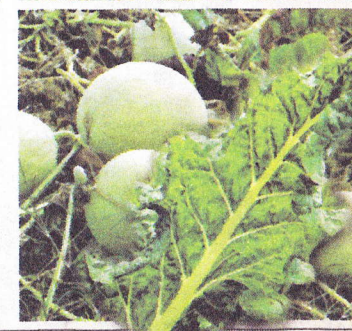
## DESTINATION>>



### Hawkesbury Farm Gate Trail

**Tours:** Hawkesbury Sightseeing Tours offers a variety of full day (\$160) and half-day (\$85) trips; pick-ups from Sydney can be arranged. (02) 4575 1421, 0408 751 422, [www.hstours.com.au](http://www.hstours.com.au)

[www.hawkesburyharvest.com.au](http://www.hawkesburyharvest.com.au),  
[www.hawkesburytourism.com.au](http://www.hawkesburytourism.com.au)



ink drawings of historic local buildings, many of which we've already seen.

Our last stop is The Hawkesbury Vegetable Farm at Wilberforce, a family affair owned by Vicki and Joe Sultana and their six young children.

We trail Vicki as she leads us into the fields and, from the shelter of our umbrellas, select celery, aubergines, endive and radishes, among other produce, while she cuts, picks or pulls up for our baskets.

With such little rain in recent

times, we dare not complain. Anyway, as we squelch through the mud I feel like a TV chef traipsing through the countryside in search of the freshest produce for dinner.

My Singaporean companions, who have no quarantine restrictions on the importation of food, add boxes of vegetables to their stack of fruit, laughing about how last time they returned home from Sydney they had to pay excess baggage on their produce.

■ The writer was a guest of Tourism NSW.