

This road may not take you to the Wizard of Oz, but
CHRIS WATSON discovers plenty of other fine stops
along its route.

I, like Dorothy in the land of Oz, have followed the Yellow Brick Road. But unlike Dorothy and her faithful companion Toto, I neither reached the wizard nor found my way back to Kansas.

Instead I tasted some excellent Hunter wines - and a fine home-made lemonade and a spicy grape sauce - and had my eyes opened to some hidden gems of the Pokolbin vineyards, even though I am a local who has been making various vineyard treks for 40 years.

The road I was on was provided by The Yellow Brick Guide, a clever little GPS audio unit - think your normal TomTom aimed at a specific purpose, visiting wine country - that weaves together music, stories and directions from affable local winemakers who take you to the places they take friends and

family when they visit.

The guide gets you under the skin of the destination, immersing you in its character without having your head buried in a map, giving you an insider's view on everything from where the winemakers used to live and work to where to find cheese, chocolates, majestic views, champagne, art, craft, coffee, snacks and fine-dining. There's even pothole warnings. And they manage to fit in some information on wine.

But one warning. Experts in wine and technology these people may be, but humour might not be their strong point: "The kangaroos in that paddock have gloves and tasers - in fact all of them have small arms." Groan.

The guide, easy to install and power via a plug in your car cigarette lighter, made its world debut in Pokolbin earlier this year and at present has three half-day tours in its satellite circuits: Mt View Vistas (with comments from Jim Chatto, chief winemaker at Pepper Tree Wines), Heart of Pokolbin (Usher Tinkler, chief winemaker at Poole's Rock Wines) and Lovedale Loop (Dan Binet, chief winemaker at Ballabourneen).

"We've all been travelling and tried to discover what's at

the heart of a place," says Rob Marjenberg, co-founder and creative director of the guide, explaining the idea behind the product. "The Holy Grail is to get the story from the locals, but most of the time it's really difficult.

"We were thinking about GPS and how it was being used and thought about making it a tool to bring in that kind of feeling of locals showing you around."

Marjenberg says the technology was developed first with "the Hunter Valley stuff" taking six to nine months to fit together.

Pokolbin was selected because they had read about the up-and-coming young winemakers of the valley and thought it was an interesting dynamic with a new generation taking over.

"Our plan was always to be in places with interesting people with interesting stories to tell," Marjenberg says, describing himself as the Rain Man of the valley as he drove the routes - "I don't know how many times - 50" - to get the commentary right.

Once it was ready to trial the in-car conversations of people using it were taped to further refine the product (Some



HELLO **YELLOW** BRICK ROAD

laughed at the kangaroo joke. Some just went silent).

"Basically it's early days yet," Marjenberg says of the guide's acceptance. "But the feedback's been fantastic. This spring we are really expecting people to get into it."

The guide is not an all-inclusive commentary. More an edited highlights reel of wine country's attractions.

We pick up our GPS at Pepper Tree Wines - I'm accompanied by two mates, my versions of Toto although not as cute or intelligent - and we set off on Mt View Vistas, past the Tuscan-style Tower Lodge, Hunter Valley Cheese Shop, Tempus Two and, Chatto informs us, the cabins where he used to live.

Then there's Brokenwood, "James Halliday is the founder", Tamberlaine, "organic wines . . . I did my first vintage there", a turnoff to Audrey Wilkinson, "one of the prettiest wineries in the valley with a stunning view", and Lindeman's, "where it all began in 1843", all on the way to Mt View, "a lovely place to unwind".

On the way Chatto speaks of the Hunter's semillon, "the best in the world" and "the reason I'm here in the Hunter". Olives rate a mention as we pass the Spanish-looking Iron Gate



Estate, and he points out Cessnock Gaol and Kelman Estate and brings up the difference in soils - what wine aficionados call "terroir", a French term denoting the characteristic soil and climate bestow on grape varieties - as we pass from Pokolbin into Mt View.

Chatto rates Tallavera Grove, home of Bistro Molines, the restaurant of NSW hall-of-fame chef Robert Molines, as one of the most stunning vineyards in the valley, and it is the last vineyard we pass before pulling in to Bimbadeen Lookout and casting our eyes back over all we have passed through and much more, with the township Cessnock nestled in mid-distance.

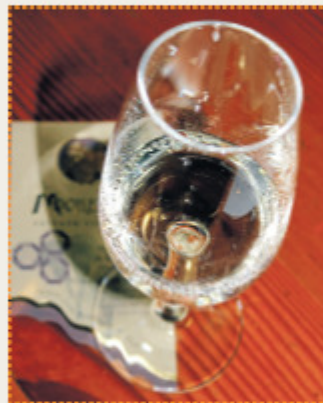
The trip along Mt View Rd, usually known as the "back road" to the vineyards from Cessnock, turning off after Bellbird, is undoubtedly the most scenically spectacular in the area and is a must for first-time or veteran visitors. I have never been to Europe's vineyards but this is how I imagine they must be, rows of vines cascading down steep hillsides with wineries and cellar doors silhouetted against the sky on ridge tops that weave into the distance. If the Rhone Valley doesn't look like this, it should. It's a lovely sight.

After the lookout it's back down the valley, regaled by an old-timer's story that before a big storm the turtles leave the nearby dams and head uphill "and they're all over the road", past Briar Ridge and its great cafe, Peterson's Wines, Mt View Estate and Mt Pleasant Winery, and alongside the famous, award-winning Tyrrell's Stevens planting.

Elfin Hill, says Chatto, was the first accommodation in Pokolbin, Mt Pleasant displays Max Dupain photographs from the 1950s and is the home of the great wines of Maurice

IF YOU GO

- The GPS guide hires out for \$39 for any length of stay in the area.
- It is available from tourism contact points including Chateau Elan, Grand Mecure The Vintage, Crowne Plaza, Cypress Lakes Resort, Peppers Guest House, Sebel Kirkton Park, Harrigan's, Tonic Hotel, Hunter Valley Visitors Centre, Ballabourneen, Pepper Tree Wines, Poole's Rock Wines and the Australia Hotel.



O'Shea, and then there's Drayton's Corner, where the adjacent vineyards are all owned by family members.

Our sweep through Mt View Vistas completed, we take a quick swing through the Lovedale Loop, which Dan "Buckets" Binet tells us is the more relaxed part of the valley. "The locals call it the dark side," he says. "It's good for white wines because of its micro-climate."

As well as vineyards there's Majors Lane Restaurant, Leaves and Fishes, glass blowing, art galleries, a cemetery, Hunter Valley Chocolate, the cricket ground and pavilion at the "very French and rustic" Wandin Valley - the owner's son is the guitarist with Grinspoon, mentions Binet - while his favourite restaurant in the valley is Mojo's, "the best food in the valley".

Vineyards roll past - Swish Wines, Peacock Hill and Calais Estate with its taps-style Verandah Restaurant, and we pull in on the opposite side of the road to Ian Burgess and Debra Moore's Moorebank Estate, where ducks and sheep wander and the elucidative Burgess explains his wines and tempts us with not only his vintages but tastings of home-made lemonade and spicy grape sauce. Good stuff.

We finish the Lovedale Loop and squeeze in a little of the Heart of Pokolbin before our day is done, and as we turn our headlights towards home I give Toto One and Toto Two the chance

to have some input. It's thumbs up all round. Following the Yellow Brick Road is, unanimously, a great idea, adding depth and enjoyment to the wine country experience. And the road gets you back where you started, whether you have ruby slippers or not.



OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD: From left, Tallavera Grove, the GPS unit, Moorebank Estate and Hunter Valley Chocolate.