

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# South Australia: it's heaven for foodies

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It was an action-packed few days, that trip to South Australia eight years ago. I swam in a pen full of mature bluefin tuna with people throwing pilchards at me from the side of the cage, which the tuna accelerated at to eat like slippery, aquatic Teslas on steroids. Talk about soiling your wetsuit.

I went out on oyster leases in quiet lagoons to see how some of Australia's very best Pacific oysters (*Crassostrea gigas*) are grown and harvested. I ate one the size of a small side-plate, a monster grown specifically for the Hong Kong market. It was a three-mouthful exercise, a \$100 mollusc. Interesting.

And I went to a small maritime museum that had a brilliant collection of vintage outboard motors. Having recently given away four of the bloody things in various states of malfunction to an enterprising lad who reckons he can fix and sell them, I reckon museums are probably the right place for old two-stroke outboards.

But the *pièce de résistance* was a gala lunch somewhere flash where my wife and I found ourselves sitting on either side of a bejewelled local identity who proudly asserted he was “the richest man in town”. You know, the “people know me I'm very important I have many leather-bound books and my apartment smells of rich mahogany” type. He had a culturally unconventional number of, um, lady friends, photos of whom in various stages of undress he proceeded to share with both of us via his phone. At lunch. With strangers.

As media trips go, this was a beauty. And if it achieved anything beyond fond memories,

indigestion and a few raised eyebrows, it was reinforcement of the state's claim to being home to the nation's best seafood. The tuna and mussels that come out of Port Lincoln; the oysters from nearby Coffin Bay and the surrounding lagoons on the Eyre Peninsula; the southern rock lobsters pulled from the cold sea off Robe; the pipis – sometimes known as Coorong cockles – that come from around Goolwa. The little Australian herring, known locally for reasons I can't fathom as tommy ruff, caught predominantly in Gulf St Vincent along with that most prized species, *Sillaginodes punctatus* – King George whiting – and garfish, squid, snapper, octopus and Spanish mackerel, which South Australians call “snook” for some strange reason.

(Honestly, you have to carry a copy of *Australian Seafood Handbook* around in your back pocket just to talk about fish in this country, such are the myriad names given to the same species in different places. You do know, I assume, that your mulloway is really a black jewfish; that your trumpeter is actually a redthroat emperor; and that your javelin fish should in fact be known as a grunter bream? I thought so.)

But one great wild seafood you may associate less with SA, only because they are caught on the vast majority of the Australian coast, is the blue swimmer crab; in South Australia they haven't come up with an alternative name for that (although here in WA they're often referred to as blue manna crab, which suggests biblical inspiration).

They are pretty heavenly to eat, I must say; I've eaten blue swimmers raw, straight from the sea, and the gelatinous flesh was amazing. Both the Spencer Gulf and Gulf St Vincent fisheries in SA are responsible for the biggest, and among the best crabs caught in Australia (the WA fisheries of Mandurah and Shark Bay are also very high on the quality scale).

Blue swimmers don't really have a season, but most are caught over summer. According to seafood guru John Susman, “they rarely live long after being removed from the water [so] they're one of the few crabs you can buy dead and uncooked”.

If you can catch some yourself, try the meat raw with soy and wasabi. Insane. Otherwise cook them (steam or barbecue): they go very orange but the meat is not too hard to extract and, as you'd imagine, it's delicate, both in texture and flavour.

You can just quarter them and eat with your hands over a cold beer or three on the back of a boat; this is a method I have personally experimented with to great effect.

Equally, blue swimmer crab meat is brilliant in an omelet, or with fried rice; plus, you can use the shells to make a stock for crab risotto. Superb. Just leave the parmesan in the fridge, please.

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