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OPPOSITE:
Jim Carreker, taking the helm of a new industry in South Australia, bringing a Napa Valley ideal to an international audience of seekers of excellent wines, fabulous accommodations, and gourmet dining.

BAROSSA VALLEY'S MAÎTRE DE MAISON

By: Amber Gibson

Investing in real estate is only half of what Jim Carreker has done. He has spurred on an entirely new industry of luxury accommodations and dining in South Australia

When he founded The Louise in 2006, Jim Carreker took a calculated bet that South Australia's Barossa could be the next Napa, or Franschhoek of South African fame. A decade later, his luxury lodge has spurred the region to new gastronomic heights. Call it the Yountville, California effect.

Jim Carreker is a people person. He has an honest face and jovial demeanor that make anyone feel instantly at ease. "Australia is a casual country," he reassured me, cutting off my apologies for what I feared was inappropriate dinner attire thanks to a Qantas lost luggage mishap. "Nobody is wearing a tie here," he pointed out, glancing around the effortlessly elegant dining room at Appellation, The Louise's restaurant. Carreker understands that comfort and privacy are true luxuries for today's discerning traveler, who seeks authenticity and bespoke experiences rather than formality and ostentation.

A Second Career

Carreker may not be a chef, but he has the same vision for Barossa that Thomas Keller had for Napa Valley. Since he fixed his sights on it, the Barossa Valley has slowly shifted from simple wine country to a culinary destination. Now the addition of nature, art and design are adding new facets to the cultural experience. A California transplant may be an unlikely choice to lead South Australia's culinary tourism revolution, but Carreker is here to stay. He and his wife Helen even acquired Australian citizenship in 2007, a statement of loyalty to their adopted home.

While living in Saratoga, California, and leading Aspect Telecommunications Corporation for 15 years, Carreker had a lot on his plate. "My life as CEO was committed and it involved a lot of travel," Carreker says. Time alone with his wife was precious and the two would often escape to Napa

Valley for a few days to recharge. Their favorite place to stay: Auberge du Soleil.

Years later, after selling his company in 2000, Carreker was ready for a new challenge. Some of his peers simply wanted to relax and play golf all around the world or avoid winter by strategically hopping between vacation homes. Carreker was too restless to slow down though, so he and Helen decided to begin a business together as hoteliers using Auberge du Soleil as their inspiration.

"I told our California friends that a simple version of our business plan was to run a property like Auberge du Soleil in another great wine region," Carreker explains. Neither he nor Helen had any career experience in hospitality, although both had plenty of shared memories as guests. They reflected on these personal experiences to build the kind of small luxury lodge that they would want to stay in themselves.

Barossa Calling

In 2002, the Carrekers' business plan was roughly developed and Jim and Helen set off across the world searching for the perfect location. "We looked at the wine regions in Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand and all over Australia," Carreker says "We were searching for a place that we would go and settle and live in, and develop."

At the time, Barossa Valley did not have any luxurious accommodations. Visitors might come to the valley for a day, touring wineries and enjoying a picnic style lunch, then retreat to Adelaide, an hour's drive away, to spend the night. "Here's a wine valley that's almost exactly the same size as Napa Valley, an hour northeast of a major city," Carreker says, drawing parallels between the Napa Valley, San Francisco connection and what Barossa Valley could become for Adelaide.





The Carrekers spent a few million dollars purchasing the old Hermitage of Marananga hotel, renaming it The Louise in 2006. They have taken a gradual approach to renovations, closing for a month each July to freshen up. This past summer they added an infinity swimming pool, expanded the fitness center, and added an outdoor games area with a croquet court, large outdoor chess set, and boules pitch. A spa may be up next.

Dining Revolution

While The Louise has been noticed and praised since its opening, Carreker knew that he couldn't single-handedly lift the Barossa's profile. He hoped to inspire other chefs and hoteliers to rise to a new level. "If we can offer a range of very good places, then people will come and stay three or four nights and visit more wineries." So Carreker welcomed his competition to help rejuvenate the region, understanding that a rising tide lifts all boats.

"It's a restaurant-led economic development within a wine region," he explains. "We made a decision that we would welcome at least four other excellent restaurants. At this moment in time we have Hentley Farm, Fino, fermentAsian, so there's still room for more." All have their own unique style, offering visitors a diversity that makes Barossa Valley an even more attractive vacation destination.

Chef Mark McNamara opened Appellation, The Louise's fine

dining restaurant, and ran the kitchen from 2005 to 2012. He says Carreker's vision for showcasing the Barossa aligned perfectly with his own culinary ideals. "We took this little country restaurant and made it something nobody thought we could," McNamara says. "I remember people told me we were mad. They didn't think there was room for a proper fine dining restaurant here. Jim's model was a restaurant with rooms."

McNamara and Appellation certainly delivered, ranking in the top 50 restaurants in the country for eight consecutive years by Australian Gourmet Traveller's national restaurant guide and last year they were named the best restaurant in South Australia. The wine list has received a Best Of nod from Wine Spectator Magazine.

A Group Effort

After four years of operating The Louise, Carreker began taking note of other new lodges in Australia, like Southern Ocean Lodge, Capella Lodge, Arkaba Station and Qualia. Having seen great marketing campaigns from emerging luxury destinations like South Africa, New Zealand and the Maldives, Carreker was spurred to do the same for Australia. "In each case, the small owners of wonderful properties had collected their efforts and created an association to market these wonderful destinations," Carreker says. "We were natural competitors finding a reason to collaborate. If 10 of us got together and put in a little time and financial resources,





we could create a not-for-profit association to travel the world and develop a story about coming to Australia for wonderful experiences.”

In 2009, Carreker invited 10 of Australia’s top independent lodge operators to The Louise to discuss how they could work together to promote a new breed of Australian luxury. The decision to form an association was unanimous and after Carreker created the constitution, legal entity, governance structure, and the process for admitting members, Luxury Lodges of Australia was incorporated in January 2010. The group began with 11 members and has now selectively grown to include 16 of the country’s most exclusive properties both new and old, ranging from island retreats to outback camps.

In 2014, The Louise also joined Relais& Chateaux, a well-known association to European and North American travelers. Finally, Carreker’s lodge had reached the same level as its inspiration, Auberge du Soleil. Now, The Louise welcomes approximately 4,000 guests a year, with American visitors increasing to 13 percent last year. The United States is The Louise’s top international market, totaling around 32 percent of room nights.

The Next Napa Valley?

As the Barossa continues to grow more popular with locals and international guests, many locals thank Carreker for his

unwavering belief that the region could offer even more than great wine. “Jim has brought to us the next level of spend with luxury travelers,” says Michael Sawyer, the cellar door manager at Torbreck, a newer winery that has received numerous accolades from renowned wine critic, Robert Parker. “He’s a great advocate of the Barossa.”

John Baldwin of Barossa Daimler Tours has been offering visitors to Barossa private tours, tailored to each individual’s wine preferences, for more than 20 years. He says that he has seen an increase in customers, particularly international ones, after The Louise opened. “For high-end travelers, we needed it,” he says. “People want more personal experiences and The Louise brings that to a whole new level.” Although Barossa is close to the same size as Napa Valley, it still only receives about a tenth of the visitors. However, this emerging wine destination is full of promise. Both Barossa and Napa are within an easy drive of a major city, both specialize in full-bodied red wines and both now have world-class accommodations and dining options with The Louise leading the way.

It was a public holiday the evening I dined with Carreker in his own restaurant, so he didn’t want to keep his employees working too late if he could help it. Tonight, he would be the evening manager on duty. “Just call reception if you need anything,” he called after me with a smile as we said our goodbyes, gesturing at the old mobile phone in his hand. “It’ll come right to me.” ✈