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**WE'VE GOT A MOAT, AND WE'RE NOT AFRAID TO USE IT: CULINARY
TOURISM, BORDERS, AND TASMANIA**

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ABSTRACT

For the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic Australia had restricted national-borders. Tasmania, Australia's island-state, added additional restrictions to its state borders. National and state controls had significant impacts on tourism and hospitality, especially culinary tourism. The state of Tasmania attempt to stimulate the sector with vouchers for Tasmanians to travel within the state. The opening of borders to inter-state travelers has been quite disruptive, causing an increase in Covid-19 cases, affecting business and consumers. Additionally, many Tasmanians have limited their activities, although restrictions have been lifted. In this piece I trace our experiences, as a family living in Hobart during the pandemic, alongside those of Tasmania.

KEY WORDS: Tasmania, Australia, Borders, MONA, seafood

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, in response to the growing Covid-19 pandemic, the government of Australia banned non-citizens and non-residents from entering Australia, and imposed 14 days of isolation for residents returning from overseas. Until late 2021 Australia kept its national borders ostensibly closed. Initially, the states left the management of borders to the Federal government. My son and I hurried back from a trip to see family in New Zealand, on hearing rumours that Tasmania might shut its borders. States within Australia cannot control international travel, but do have significant powers, including to control intra-state travel. As we settled into home quarantine the local newspaper, *The Mercury*, ran the now infamous headline: “We’ve got a moat and we’re not afraid to use it.”¹ As an island-state the Premier Peter Gutwein was able to issue what were then the “toughest border restrictions in Australia”. Unsurprisingly, these restrictions impacted on Tasmanian’s tourism, including its culinary tourism.

**Image central to understanding manuscript: MERCURY-WE’VE GOT A MOAT
(Reference Footnote 1)**

Pre-Covid, in the financial year 2018-2019, there were 1.32 million visits to Tasmania, not all leisure related, of both interstate (the majority from the three largest states of Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland), and international visitors. With a \$2.5 billion dollar spend, tourism is a major employer, and contributes roughly 9% of state revenue.² Closed borders restricted both interstate and international travel, causing considerable losses in

the sector.³ The introduction of a Covid-19-quashing lockdown in Tasmania, which temporarily closed many businesses, further damaged the tourism sector.

¹ Frontpage: *The Mercury*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/themercury.com.au/photos/a.255574513407/10158311877418408/?type=3> accessed January 20, 2022.

² *Tourism Snapshot: Year Ending June 2019*, Tourism Tasmania, https://www.tourismtasmania.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/84635/2019-Q2-Tasmanian-Tourism-Snapshot-June-2019-TVS-IVS-NVS.pdf, accessed January 20, 2022.

³ *State Tourism Satellite Account 2019-20*, Australian Government, Australian Trade and Investment Commission: Tourism Research Australia, <https://www.tra.gov.au/data-and-research/reports/state-tourism-satellite-account-2019-20/tasmania-tourism-summary>, accessed January 2022.

FOODIE DESTINATION

Tasmania is increasingly seen as a foodie destination. Its agricultural history and present (it is still known as the apple isle, and today grows a huge range of foodstuffs in a wide variety of microclimates) have been leveraged to make food and drink a key reason people come to Tasmania. Farmers markets, unique seafood, access to fresh produce, and restaurants using local ingredients, have driven food-centric tourism. Wine, whiskey, and gin – from tasting flights to production tours – are common activities. Hobart’s iconic Museum of New and Old Arts (MONA) (attended by one in five visitors to Tasmania, and frequently cited as the leading reason for travel to Tasmania) puts food and drink at the centre of the museum and its seasonal festivals. The museum itself is surrounded by a winery (wines available for sale at multiple venues across the site), brews beer, and has chickens roaming the grounds. There are currently six places to eat and drink, including destination-dining such as *Source* a high-end restaurant self-described as a “temple to seasonal Tasmanian dining,” and *Faro* which incorporates performance art and dining with themed menus.⁴ Dark MoFo, the winter festival run by MONA at locations across the state has as its core a nightly winter feast.



Rooster on MONA grounds, Tarulevicz, 2021.

In 2020 in a gesture redolent with symbolism, MONA dug up their lawn “the erstwhile site of markets and concerts, beanbags and wine” to turn it into a WWII inspired Victory Garden. It

⁴ MONA website, <https://mona.net.au/eat-drink>, accessed January 20, 2022.

was marketed with images of Kirsha Kaechele, the project’s director, sprawling in a glamorous frock and high-heels with an empty wine glass amongst the seedlings.⁵ This was not *just* spectacle, although it was spectacle, it was also interactive. Australian residents were invited to “do the same”. That is, transform their “own useless lawns into your very own backyard plot of veggie paradise.”⁶

Image central to understanding manuscript: VICTORY GARDEN (Reference Footnote 5)

As an extended art installation/performance piece, the Victory Garden project captured the zeitgeist. Big box hardware stores and plant nurseries sold out of seeds and edible plants. At our house, our unpacking was further delayed by the digging of garden beds. We carefully portioned our seeds (carrots, radishes, lettuce, kale, etc.) to share with friends.

MONA’s Victory Garden included a competition, with photographs on Instagram, prizes, and a dedicated utube channel, resulting in extensive media coverage.⁷ It wasn’t enough to remake your garden, to protect against feared disruptions of global supply-chains, it had to be documented, and with style. Tasmanians were encouraged to collect and curate images of our pandemic, and not just by MONA. I had my own students participate in a Covid-19 archive.⁸ Like many others, I experimented with new recipes (sourdough included), and posted my results on social media. Our culinary tourism was largely virtual.

New recipes had replaced dining out, and some restaurants pivoted to delivery. Before Covid-19 we rarely had meals delivered, but we made strategic decisions about the restaurants we would try to help survive lockdown. These included “local, cheap and cheerful” places that

⁵ MONA Victory Garden, 2020. <https://mona.net.au/museum/kirsha-s-portal/mona-victory-gardens>

⁶ MONA Victory Gardens Website, <https://mona.net.au/museum/kirsha-s-portal/mona-victory-gardens>, accessed January 24, 2022.

⁷ MONA Victory Garden Instagram collection, <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/monavictorygardensproject/>, accessed January 24, 2022.

⁸ A Journal of the Plague Year Website, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/page/welcome>, accessed January 24, 2022.

we would miss, and one destination-dining establishment that we are very fond of, Templo. A 20-seat restaurant, with a focus on local ingredients cooked in a modern Italian style, Templo is a favorite, but also representative of destination dining in Hobart. It is hard to get into, and there are often more tourists than locals dining – not the kind of restaurant that would usually offer delivery. When my birthday booking was cancelled, we got a (delicious) meal delivered instead. When online teaching and home-schooling in a house we'd newly moved into and not fully unpacked, got to be too much, we got another meal delivered. There was an anniversary delivery dinner too. Delivery provided a much needed burst of difference into the monotony of our own cooking, despite the new recipes we tried, but one that was nonetheless lesser than dining out.



Templo pasta dish, Tarulevich, 2020

Financially speaking, Templo, and other higher-end restaurants offered something special (and more expensive) than delivery pizza, but our spend was not what it would have been had we dined in. We ordered food only, with none of the fun and funky natural wines that we would usually try. Rather we poured ourselves a gin and tonic beforehand, or opened a bottle of wine from the cupboard. The restaurant industry did get some support via the Federal government Job-keeper scheme, where employers could pay eligible employees a minimum of \$1,500 (before tax) per fortnight and then claim this back from the Australia Tax Office. Restaurants like Templo, re-deployed wait-staff as delivery drivers, offering low or no-contact delivery by the people who had previously poured my wine and chatted about ingredients and techniques. Strategic home delivery and government schemes were incomplete replacements for splurging tourists, but this restaurant (and many others, but

not all) survived that moment. As a tenured-academic, with financial security and housing, our family experience of the pandemic is not only globally privileged, it is locally privileged. The Tasmania Project found that one in four Tasmanians experienced food shortages during the pandemic. Not everyone was able to make selective choices about food delivery.⁹

NEW BEGININGS

Once the lockdown lifted, the drawbridge to the moat remained (largely) up. Hospitality and tourist sites reopened, but with a focus on Tasmanian tourists. The state government actively encouraged Tasmanians to take holidays, and engage in tourist activities within the state with a \$7.5 million “tourism travel initiative,” of vouchers. There were various rules about how the vouchers could be spent. All expenditure was based on reimbursement by the state government with the submission of receipts. Culinary tourism was largely excluded from the first tranche of the scheme. It was possible to spend the \$50 per person in our family on an organized tour of wineries, but not a gin flight, or a meal. Tasmanians were told, via extensive advertising campaigns:

“Now's the time to make yourself at home. We could all do with a break right now. An afternoon adventure, a day somewhere new, or a weekend to indulge. And while we're enjoying ourselves, we'll be helping out our tourism operators at the same time. That's a win-win all round...So, it makes perfect sense to book that wildlife tour, a city break, perhaps a cooking course, or maybe a cave tour.”

In the first 40 minutes of the online registration opening 60000 people applied. 21500 vouchers were awarded.¹⁰ Our family was lucky and got one.

Having always fancied a class at the Agrarian Kitchen, (Tasmania's premier cooking school where you can pick your produce, butcher your meat, and then spend the day making them

⁹ Katherine Kent, et. al., “Food insecure households faced greater challenges putting healthy food on the table during the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia,” *Appetite* 169, No. 1 (2022): 1-10.

¹⁰ Australia Broadcasting Corporation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-08/tasmania-make-yourself-at-home-covid-19-travel-voucher-delay/12640612>, accessed January 21, 2020.

into delicious meals), I looked to spend my voucher, but it wouldn't stretch to even 20% of the day-long class. Instead we booked a cottage at a local vineyard. Our 2-night stay came to \$310 before a promised reimbursement of \$150 per night. During our time away we largely self-catered. A lunch of pies at the local Bakery, three ice cream cones, and a bottle of wine from the vineyard was our culinary expenditure. We used our experience portion of the vouchers on kid-centric activities, the Poo-Museum, a horse ride.

A second round of vouchers drew 35000 people to apply and they all were allocated in under an hour.¹¹ Bookings were sluggish that time and the dates of scheme extended twice. In response to feedback, food and drink activities expanded to include “recognized unique Tasmanian tourism offering.” We got lucky again, but still couldn't find a suitable food-themed activity that didn't involve huge additional expenditure. I used the accommodation voucher for a gloriously selfish night in a hotel in the city. I met friends for dinner and cocktails, and went out for dessert, a personal (and unreimbursed) idea of culinary tourism rather than that sanctioned by the state.

In 2021, Man-Brooker award winning Tasmanian author Richard Flanagan published *Toxic: The Rotting Underbelly of the Tasmanian Salmon Industry*, questioning the environmental and health qualities of the industry.¹² Tasmanian salmon – farmed Atlantic Salmon – are a staple of local restaurant menus, and of the state brand. Flanagan's book received intense attention nationally, and divided many in Tasmania. The salmon industry is interested in expanding and being a chicken alternative. Not in the sense that tuna was “chicken of the sea,” but in the sense that pork became the “other white meat.”¹³ Huon salmon, the leading producer of Tasmanian salmon's new advertising slogan “Give chicken the night off; serve up some Huon Salmon,” makes this explicit. The advertisement featured on *Gruen* (a popular Australian television series that critiques advertising) and begins with a couple in the supermarket. He hesitatingly says: “I don't know...chicken again?” to which she replies:

¹¹ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-30/tasmania-make-yourself-at-home-travel-vouchers-2nd-round/12717738>, accessed January 21, 2020.

¹² Richard Flanagan, *Toxic: The Rotting Underbelly of the Tasmanian Salmon Industry* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2021).

¹³ Elspeth Probyn, “When fish is meat,” in Banu Subramaniam and Sushmita Chatterjee, *Meat!: A Transnational Analysis* (Durham, Duke University Press: 2021), 17.

“Nah, I want something quick and easy... Salmon.”¹⁴ The demotion of salmon from premium food – the thing you order on holiday in Tasmania – to a weeknight staple was unsettling for many.

With borders closed, it wasn't just passenger planes that were halted. There were so few flights to Australia that in October 2021 the US Postal Service suspended service.¹⁵ We miss the packages from our friends and family in America. In Tasmania, producers of elite export goods – crayfish and cherries in particular – could no longer fly goods to international markets. Premium crayfish appeared in local independent groceries stores with handwritten signs indicating that export quality could be purchased for low prices. At \$A50 for a 700gm lobster this was still a luxury item, albeit one that would usually retail for \$A93.¹⁶ Local wharves become pop up sites of culinary tourism, as locals lined up for lobster and onlookers watched those lining up. With exports of live seafood to China (the largest market for the crayfish) still suspended, serving local rock lobster was a potent symbol at Christmas 2021. For in mid-December Tasmania opened its borders and lucky people celebrated family reunification, regionalism, and nationalism with a lobster-laden Christmas table.¹⁷ In the context of the salmon controversy, buying local crayfish for Christmas was also about a renegotiation of the relationships with premium produce and state identity.

Reopening the state to travelers has been a source of conflict similar to that around salmon – welfare versus economy. In some ways, it echoes Tasmania's divisive forestry wars, with similar fracture lines between environment and economic benefits.¹⁸ Federal Group, who dominate gambling in the state, and operate tourism, hospitality, retail, and freight businesses, are perceived to have pushed for the borders to reopen. To some extent this discomfort re-inscribes past Tasmanian worries over the roles played by powerful business interests from outside Tasmania, and the complex tensions between outside economic interests, dependence, and the well-being of Tasmanians.

¹⁴ Huon Salmon advertisement, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKpYYYzbz68>, accessed January 21, 2022.

¹⁵ US Postal Service Website, <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/service-alerts/international/welcome.htm>, accessed January 20, 2022.

¹⁶ Australian Broadcast Company website, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2020-02-19/scott-inkson-lobster-fisherman-tasmania/11977344>, January 20, 2022.

¹⁷ Newspaper article, <https://www.themercury.com.au/news/tasmania/rock-lobster-sales-struggle-in-leadup-to-christmas-despite-low-prices/news-story/5a78fc1c4b627d6359b271662a3ac019>, accessed January 20, 2022.

¹⁸ Quentin Beresford, *The Rise and Fall of Gunns Ltd* (Sydney, New South Publishing, 2015).

The Christmas period and the summer holidays following are peak tourism season in Tasmania. The Sydney to Hobart boat race starts on Boxing Day (December 26th) bringing thousands of visitors. It is accompanied by a food festival “The Taste” (December 28-January 3), which includes a large New Year’s Eve function. In January 2022 Hobart hosted a major international cricket match, the 5th Ashes Test, which drew yet more visitors. MONA’s summer festival MONA FOMA (January 21-30) likewise attracts huge numbers. Structurally, summer is also when most Australians use a large portion of their annual leave, often taking three or more weeks off. Tasmania, which already markets itself as pristine and green, was perceived by many as a Covid-19 safe destination. Locally many hoped that opening in time to capture these peak tourist periods would provide a much needed booster for the local tourism industry.

A couple of border scares, and a short 3-day lockdown aside, the last year has been relatively free for Tasmania, as the moat meant our Covid-19 experience has been quite different to that of Melbourne and Sydney with their high case-loads and significant restrictions over very long periods. In the weeks after opening the borders there was rapid policy change, which left many Tasmanians feeling confused and concerned. The state exposure-site listings quickly became overwhelmed, and was consequently abandoned. Requirements for negative Covid-19 results before arrival into the state were dropped. Polymerase-chain reaction (PCR) testing facilities were overrun. The state moved to only requiring Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) results, which were initially undersupplied, and at the time of writing remain inconsistently available. Vaccination for children 5-11 started in January 2022 but dose two won’t be administered before schools go back in February. Some parents wonder why the borders were opened before Christmas. Many Tasmanians feel unsafe. My son’s play-dates have been outdoors. We didn’t go to the cinema as planned. Locals are electing not to dine out. We’ve largely slunk back to delivery.

In contrast to the rhetoric from the US and Europe, media reports from the hospitality industry paint the opening of borders as disruptive, especially restaurants. There have been staffing shortages, from illness, from difficulties in testing, and from the need for household members of close contacts to isolate. Closed borders meant serving the local rather than visitor market, and for some establishments this was safe and sustainable. In early January 2022 a well-loved local establishment Bar Wa Izakaya, announced that they were “shutting down temporarily,” not because of Health Department advice but to “support their staff” who

they continued to pay: “we believe a financial cost is better than any health cost to our staff, family and you.” They concluded their statement: “Despite what the Liberal Party would have you believe, most restaurants did not want this. This border opening will slowly suffocate us.”¹⁹ Several other restaurants, the kinds of places tourists come to Tasmania to visit, did the same. These closures are rolling rather than permanent. Bar Wa Izakaya has reopened, but these days it pays to check if somewhere is open on any given day.

At the same time, inter-state visitors are still coming, and in comparison to many parts of Australia, Tasmania still feels relatively Covid-19 free. Friends from Victoria and New South Wales are visiting, they are going to vineyards, and they’re eating local Bruny Island oysters. In the long term, the future of culinary tourism in Tasmania is probably secure. Climate change has prompted vintners from South Australia and Victoria (Australia’s leading wine producing states) to start growing grapes in Tasmania. Demand for Tasmania wine already exceeds supply.²⁰ We will probably not be able to hold onto the secret of the superiority of Tasmanian sparkling wine, and future tourists will be filling their suitcases with bottles. Tasmanian culinary tourism will likely continue towards elite consumption and experiences. Already some in Tasmania feel that the premium food and wine produced is out of the reach of most, and that Tasmanian food should be kept in Tasmania rather than exported.²¹ Small-batch gin, local truffles, leatherwood honey, award-winning whiskey, heritage varieties of apples and of potatoes are going to continue to draw certain kinds of hungry tourists to Tasmania.

¹⁹ Bar Wa Izakaya Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/barwaizakaya>, January 2, 2022.

²⁰ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2022-01-18/tasmanian-wine-in-short-supply/100749724>, accessed January 25, 2022.

²¹ Katherine Kent, et. al Tasmanians Want a More Resilient and Sustainable Food System: Report 49. *University Of Tasmania, Institute For Social Change News*, 12. Retrieved from <https://blogs.utas.edu.au/isc/files/2021/10/49.-Learning-from-food-supply-challenges-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>



Eating Tasmania Oysters on Holiday, Abbie Melchior, January 2022

Summer at our house includes plum from the garden – red, yellow, and green. But as I jam and stew I’m filled with trepidation about the start of the school year, both my son’s and my own – my institution is planning face-to-face delivery in February. As a family I think we need to bank some good times, so I’ve started looking at places we could go away for a few nights, hoping someone has got cold feet and cancelled their holidays. I used to plan my holidays around eating out, picking lunch and dinner destinations as others might bush-walks or museums. This time I’m looking for not too many people, a beach maybe, so it doesn’t feel quite so much like another visit to a (well-ventilated) park. Outdoor dining, which I usually avoid because it’s too hot, or too cold, and less comfortable, is now a desirable quality. I’ve unwittingly swapped a moat for outdoor seating - I wonder which wineries have al fresco patio dining?