



Just the Tonic

A NEW HUNTER VALLEY RETREAT

A DELICATE blue-tailed wren raps repeatedly at his reflection on the mirror-like verandah door, just loudly enough to wake us from a lazy weekend lie-in on our comfortable king-sized bed. Here in NSW's Hunter Valley, only a two-hour drive north of Sydney, we ponder the groaning breakfast feast secreted away in our well stocked kitchen and bar, yet linger on peaceful bird-watch as the early light creeps across Lovedale's patchwork of farms and vineyards. Tonic Hotel's small lake and 25 acres of dusty-green fields are a peaceful setting for the contemporary 'Aussi outback shed' inspired cluster of buildings (all glass, expansive timber covered verandah and shiny-silver corrugated iron walls).

A labour of love of hosts Nici and Tom Stanford, whose previous business encounters include Sydney's successful 'Wife Without Strings', Tonic consists of six guest rooms housed in two three-in-a-row blocks, as well as a stand-alone two bedroom apartment (including a central lounge and fireside area), a separate lounge pavilion perfect for guest parties and conferences, with an adjacent pool surrounded by young native plantings. Much like the Hunter

itself (though only recently opened) Tonic is ever-changing.

'Tis small wonder that a spirited wine and food region so close to Sydney is high on the agenda for those with weekend time on their hands. The Hunter's original 'rural and rustic' set is being matched by a more 'global and groovy' ambience, complete with international-standard golf courses, sparkling spas, helicopter tours, restaurants, cafes and – of course – wineries. Tonic takes the best of all these genres and makes a mix of its very own. As Nici Stanford says, "We wanted to create something slick and modern, and at the same time to promote local goods".

Once inside Tonic's rooms, guests can kick off their shoes – literally – and enjoy the warmth of the heated polished concrete floors, the luxury of whitewashed high-ceiling spaces, screen-less showers and quirky designer touches – a bright red clock here and splash of colour there, a textured throw rug on the lounge, and 'shaggy-dog' slippers that positively defy you to walk past without slipping them on. In a clever extension to the 'just passing and thought we would pop in' concept, there is no formal check-in or

check-out. Instead, Nici acts as a perfect host and 'conciierge' pre-visit, and will inspire and arrange a string of activities to meet your needs. And just when you thought you couldn't leave behind the fluffy slippers, voila! You can purchase it all – everything from your room is for sale. Rooms are \$390 per night, the apartment \$850. Bookings, (02) 4930 9999, www.tonichotel.com.au

FABULOUS FARE

Tatlers: Lively local winery, wine bar and modern oz café, (02) 4930 9139;
Leaves and Fishes: Boathouse café with the freshest seafood - they aqua farm their own, (02) 4930 7400; **Lovedale Long Lunch:** An annual gourmet meander through seven participating wineries, May 20-21, 2006, one of many outstanding events organised in the district, www.winecountry.com.au;
Labna: Savour this yoghurt/herb mix from your Tonic fridge, and then purchase more at the **Smelly Cheese Shop**, Pokolbin, (02) 4998 6960 ;
In-room Tonic massage: More than a feast for your senses, (Bookings through Nici).