

EASILY over, I'm not. It takes something special to get me to a train station by 7.30am on a chilly Saturday morning. But here I am at the not-so-splendid Spencer Street station, surrounded by 40 other bleary-eyed travellers.

We're about to board the New Rutherglen Red, a two-day rail odyssey into the heartland of one of Australia's classic wine-growing areas just west of Albury.

Some may remember the original Rutherglen Red. I can recall wedding photos of a couple who thought it would be a good idea to get hitched on the train. Fortunately they had the ceremony over in the first half-hour — the shots from later that day resembled a Hogarth sketch of Gin Lane.

By the early '80s, the yobbo factor became too much for the town, but too late — Rutherglen's image as a fine wine destination had been defined.

Fifteen years on, wine lover Paul Robinson decided that the Rutherglen Red concept was ready for a makeover. It took some convincing — locals had long memories of the bacchanalian excess of the original tours.

These days Robinson works with many regional winemakers, and most of his characters (and this area has more than its fair share). And it begins right on the train.

The icy industrial cityscape of Melbourne's north soon gives way to sunny winter pastures as our train crosses the Great Divide into Victoria's north-east. After tucking in to rolls and pastries, we venture into the lounge car where we spread out Saturday's papers. After an hour there's an announcement.

Robinson introduces a mysterious character buried in his newspaper. It turns out to be Chris Killean, sixth-generation Rutherglen winemaker. He had been in Melbourne on business, and boarded with the group at Spencer Street. Stannos & Killean are famous for their reds and fortifieds — we are in for a treat.

First up is the *breed* chard, an unusual red variety and a Rutherglen specialty. As he gesticulates and rolls his glass, I imagine that we're going to be wearing the wine if the train lurches. Then we're sampling the renowned vintage port, with more coffee.

Just as we're getting into the rhythm of this new version of rail travel we arrive at Chiltern, 10 minutes from All Saints "Castle" Winery. I don't quite understand the Australian connection between wineries and castles, but All Saints is almost the real thing.

Built in 1862 as a copy of Scotland's Castle of Mey, the walls are a metre thick allowing the wine to be "cellared" at ground level.

After an extensive tasting presented by chief winemaker David Brown, lunch appears on one grand table in the enormous main cellar, adding to the medieval ambience.

A brisk stroll around the nearby winery of the crusty Max Coffield, who makes legendary sparkling reds and fortifieds, takes care of the excess lunchen kiloboules (I hope). Coffield, who learnt his craft at All Saints when it was family



Victorian charm: The House at Mount Prior, where you get your first, and probably last, taste of very young wine.

All aboard the red eye

Kevin English drinks in the atmosphere on the re-born Rutherglen Red.

owned, takes us through the sparkling process, including disgorging and recapping. (So that's how they put the corks in — with much difficulty.)

The recent addition of a sunny terrace cafe run by the Cobled women is well suited to his underrated sparkling or three.

Down the road in his basement, Chris Killean slips the "wine thief" (a 30-centimetre eye-dropper) in a barrel and splashes some '61 vintage port in our glasses. The weekend enters the sublime.

This original rough-hewn cellar has several large vats that have been used for fermenting wine for over a century. Chris tells the story of the swaggle who fell in, to be found weeks later. The vintage drank quite well apparently. Had plenty of body.

Early evening at Rutherglen's Tiberius restaurant and the cautious six-piece jazz

band gets up close and personal as they leak from table to table belting out requests. They enjoy their work — the following day they were to play live music at Albury TAFE Open Day, in a fit.

The band features James, the oldest jazz drummer in captivity, about to celebrate his third millennium, we're mild. Wishing to see the next millennium myself, I cough out the door and back to my room at around 11, a wise move.

Next morning there's the option of a leisurely nine holes at the Corowa golf club, one of the most beautiful courses on the River Murray, and the longest in Australia.

I decide to pass. Instead it's a kick-start coffee at the patio cafe at the homely Gehrig, Rutherglen's oldest winery, that sets me up for the next tasting.

Then, the day's highlight.

The House at Mount Prior exudes Victorian grace and charm from its position on a ridge overlooking the vines. After a quick glass of sparkling on arrival, owner cum spruiker Jim Sawyer presents a comedic dissertation on his very fine wines through various stages of development (very young wine tastes disgusting, thanks Jim).

At the back of the homestead is a terrace manxpee restaurant with an open kitchen, where we tuck in to lunch.

Sawyer insists on taking us down to the cellar after lunch to try some serious vintages. Oh, all right then. And a few minutes silence in one of the quiet drawing rooms of the guesthouse is in order.

But must we laze on the sunny front veranda with a Mount Prior red. A local

troubadour induces a few tentative vocalists to join him.

What starts as a few singalongs continues unaccompanied on the train home — denesting that old reliable Country Road! I lead a capella version of *Bohemian Rhapsody* as we clatter through Seymour — fortunately there are no video or audio recorders in sight.