

Grape escape

VERONICA MATHESON
keeps her feet on a
rolling tour

IT has the ring of a blind date. Meet under the clock (well not quite) at Spencer St Station, board the Rutherglen Red (another name for a red rattler with cosy VIP lounge) for a weekend in northeastern Victoria.

It could be a lot of fun, or a date to instantly forget.

The early morning start does not augur well. Nor do renovations and the resulting makeshift alleys to the train.

Then time to eye the passengers wearing badges that mark "our gang" — 30 of us from 20 to 70 years, all interested in the fruits of the vine.

Paul Robinson, who runs these wine tours, hurries us into the train's cosy lounge (a buffet car hitched to the back of the regular Albury train) that leaves exactly at 7.50am.

Settled in comfy seats, it is time for bubbly (or coffee), with pastries as a sugar kick.

The train's relaxing rhythm calms and time is spent discovering the dynamics of our group. Some have made the trip several times before.

One lively chap told his wife



he was off for a wild weekend with Fifi. "And she let me go," he demurs.

The Rutherglen Red of the 1980s won a reputation for a wild, boozy weekend. Today the focus is on winemaking and characters in the industry. But our gang is also set to have a jolly good time.

With us is wine maker Andrew Buller of Buller Wines, who gives a potted family history, with finer points of the vintage. Then we sample.

Andrew has the passion so typical of winemakers we will meet over the weekend.

LOWDOWN

THE TRIP: Link Tours' Rutherglen Red leaves Spencer St Station on selected Saturday mornings, and overnights in Albury.

DEPARTURES: April 16-17; May 21-22; July 23-24; October 8-9.

COST: \$518 per person twin share, with meals/wine, accommodation, and entertainment.

WARNING: Be on time. The train runs to schedule and cannot wait for late arrivals.

CELEBRATIONS: The Tastes of Rutherglen, 1300 787 929.



celebrates the region's food and wine over the weekends of March 12-14, and March 19-21.

INQUIRIES: 9699 8422, (www.linktours.com.au)

Rutherglen is one of Australia's oldest wine-growing regions, developed in the 1880s by immigrants who moved there in search of gold.

At Chiltern, we leave the train for a waiting coach and head to All Saints Winery.

It looks like a winery, though George Sutherland-Smith built it to look like a castle to remind him of his Scottish homeland.

We develop a thirst heading up the elm-lined drive where a cooper is putting finishing touches to a wooden wine keg.

Inside, lofty ceilings and red

brick walls create a wonderfully cool spot for tasting. We discover — and our noses confirm — Rutherglen has liqueur muscats, tokays and frontignacs that rate among the best in the world.

At a baronial table lunch, kindred spirits coalesce, including some with a passion for vintage cars.

Then off for another sampling — Link Tours has so much repeat business it varies the wineries visited on each trip.

Today Lake Moodemere winery makes the cut, with its



Wonderful wine: Rustic Rutherglen (above) flaunts its charms while a cooper (above left) plies his ancient trade.

award-winning Shiraz and Biancone; then Bullers, whose wine we sampled on the train.

We check into Quality Hotel on Olive in Albury for a night at Canteen Cuisine with entertainment by Zoot Suit. Sunday takes in Mount Prior

vineyard with lunch at the main house (with tower and veranda) and B&B accommodation with an emphasis on good food and wine.

There's entertainment by singer Bruce Lynch before the ride to Chiltern Station for the 3.10pm to Melbourne.