

Escape into smooth grin and tonic

break away
AURORA DANIELS

The Hunter Valley region is synonymous with boutique wine, gourmet food and superb accommodation – and the tonic hotel in the Lovedale region left us wanting for nothing.

Remember those times you have treated yourself to a plush stay-away and thought, “Oh, I love that cushion cover, I wonder where they got it,” or “That cowskin rug would look great in front of our fireplace, where am I going to get one of those?” Well, everything you see in your tonic room you can take home – for a price.

“Your room is a shop – it’s mini-bar gone crazy,” host Nici Stanford says. “Tonic shop came about as I am a frustrated shopkeeper and the only way to continually buy things [was] to sell them. It has proven very successful. I’ve sold beds, pillows, statues and sheets, as well as all the other bits and pieces. It makes sense as people sleep in the bed, use the pillow and know that it’s for them.”

From the very beginning we realised this stay was going to be special. We were given a cabin number and a special door code when booking so you can come and go without having to see another person.

And once we arrived at the bushland setting and walked into our room we were whisked into a relaxed holiday state by soft, funky tunes flowing from the stereo and a personalised welcome message written on a blackboard. It feels really nice not to just be a number, but have your names written on the wall. Fresh lilies and candles adorned the room, which added a soft touch to a very clean and modern decor, with minimalist chic furniture and art pieces.

The view from the deck takes in vineyards, dams and the Brokenback Ranges. The eight guest rooms are a modern take on the good old Aussie shed with corrugated iron, steel, glass and aged timber. But luxuries such as heated floors and large screenless showers have been added, as well as all the best in local food, wine and other goodies, including hand-knitted toys and Aesop body products.

Stanford offers six big rooms with king-size beds and ensuites with huge showers, deep baths and double sinks, and a two-bedroom apartment where up to four people have a full kitchen, lounge and dining area with fireplace as well. And every room is styled differently.

Stanford’s other dream was to open a decor shop and she loves the mix of antique and very modern, which is expressed around the property. There is a lounge for guests to relax in or to invite



tonic hotel, Hunter Valley, NSW

Where: 251 Talga Road, Lovedale, Hunter Valley.

From Canberra: About a five-hour drive.

Phone: (02) 4930 9999.

Website: www.tonichotel.com.au

Cost per night: \$425 per room, \$890 per apartment (sleeps four)

friends around for a cocktail night by the pool, a formal dinner or even a night of DVDs and board games. “We made it a room you would want to spend time in,” Stanford says. “The walls are hand-painted stripes and the furniture easy.”

The hotel also offers in-room massages.

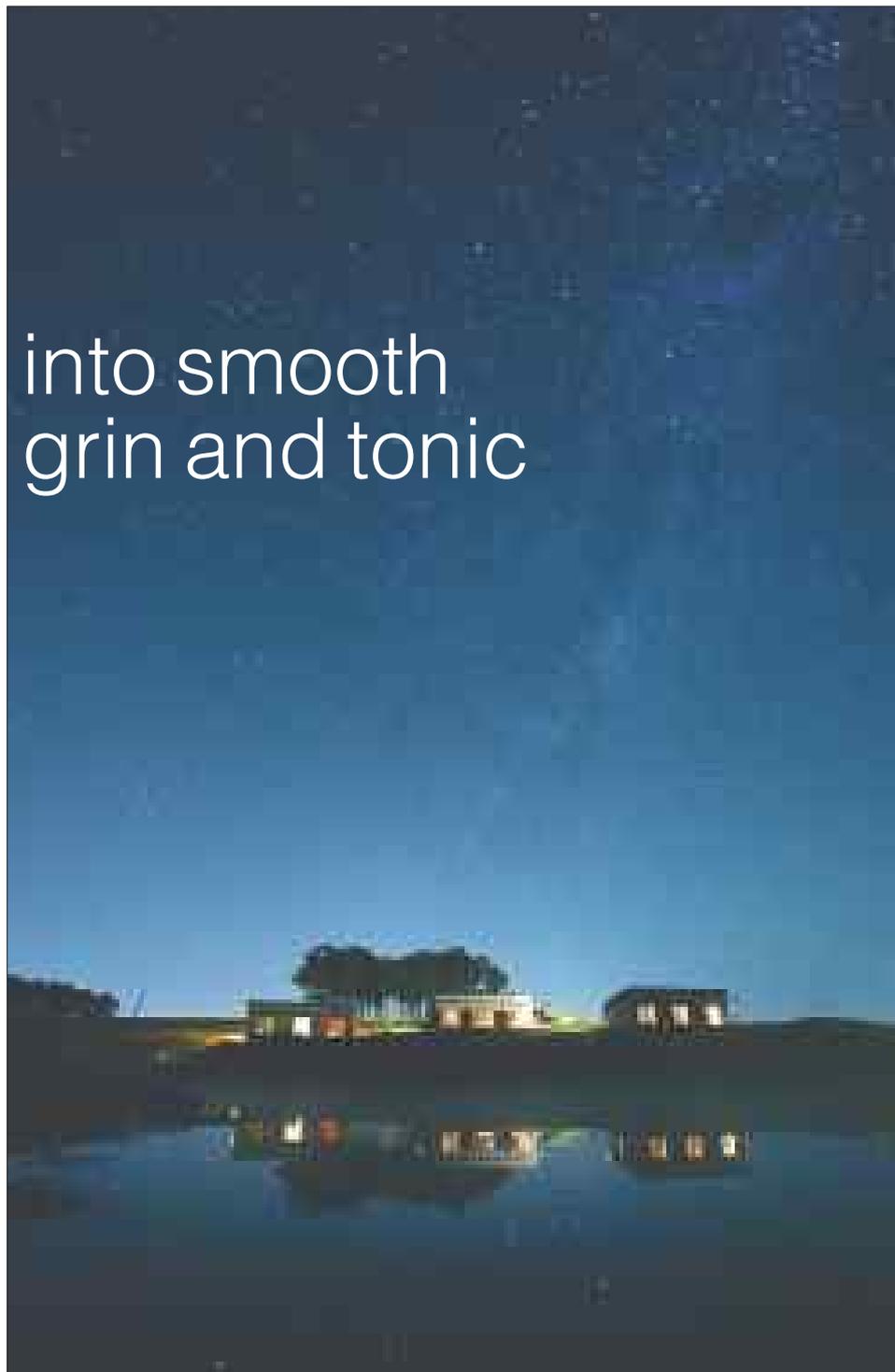
Breakfast is a do-it-yourself thing. Your fridge is restocked daily with juices, fruit, eggs, pastries, breads, and we were treated to a delicious mushroom, bacon and thyme ragout one morning, an apple and rhubarb crumble the next, and yoghurt, fresh fruits, muesli and eggs another. “Wear nothing and eat when you like in the privacy of your own room,” Stanford says. The quality tea and coffee were a great way to kick-start your day.

The hotel is geared to adults – with no children under 15 allowed.

Bar fridges are stocked with Moët and boutique beers and there are books, DVDs, CDs and board games (some for mature audiences) all available for you to use, while tattoo packs and condoms are for sale.

Operating for four years, tonic itself is also up for grabs – you can buy the whole property. Stanford has decided it is time for her next venture (not yet decided).

We dragged ourselves away from the



Easy on the eye and easy to take: the chic interiors of the bedroom and bathroom at the tonic hotel in Lovedale, Hunter Valley, left, and a view of the hotel at dusk, above.

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■ Aurora Daniels and her partner stayed at tonic as guests of Tourism NSW.