
Beyond the vines: Hunter Valley village launches permanent art trail

Wollombi's six independent galleries now share a single visitor map — a year-round companion to the biennial Wollombi Valley Sculpture Festival, opening 12 September

WOLLOMBI, NSW — In a Hunter Valley village of roughly twelve public buildings, six of them make or show art. From this month, they share a map.

The Wollombi Art Trail brings six independent galleries and studios onto a single illustrated guide for the first time, all within a ten-minute walk of one another in the historic village of Wollombi, 90 minutes north of Sydney and 30 minutes south of the Hunter Valley wine country on Tourist Drive 33.

The artists themselves are not concentrated in the village. Around a thousand people live across the Wollombi Valley's 170,000 acres — in Laguna, Murrays Run, Paynes Crossing, Sweetmans Creek and half a dozen other pockets of bush and farmland — and a striking number of them make things. The village is where the valley converges. Wollombi takes its name from a word meaning meeting place of the waters.

The concentration was never planned. When dairy farming failed in the valley in the 1970s, land became cheap, and artists and craftspeople took up old slab huts and hillside cabins — a shift documented by the Australian Financial Review in 2016, which described potters and artisans establishing studios through the hills, and noted that one of the country's leading sculptors lived in the valley. Fifty years on, many of those families are into their second and third generation of working artists.

What has been missing is a way for visitors to find them. Several of the galleries sit just off the main road — behind the general store, up the hill, past the bend — and are easily missed by anyone who does not already know to look.

“The artists are spread right across the valley — you would not find most of them without an invitation. The village is where you can meet them. That is all this map does: it tells you where to look.”

— Brett McMullen, President, Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce

The Trail launches during the 2026 Wollombi Valley Sculpture Festival, regional NSW's largest and longest-running sculpture event, which runs 12–27 September with more than 180 works and a prize pool exceeding \$80,000. Established in 2002 and entirely volunteer-run, the Festival is held every two years. The galleries are open every weekend of the year.

“The Festival brings extraordinary sculpture to the valley every two years, but the Wollombi Art Trail ensures that the enriching experience continues long after the Festival ends. Creating a permanent artist's trail is exactly the kind of legacy we want the Festival to leave behind.”

— Sheena Duncan, Executive Director, Wollombi Valley Sculpture Festival

The six venues are Artisan Collective, Roadside Gallery, Jodie Usher Gallery, The Forge, Little Yengo Gallery and Old Fireshed Gallery. More than 70 artists exhibit through the Wollombi Valley Arts Council, the volunteer-run body that operates two of them: Old Fireshed Gallery, converted from the village's original fire shed in 2003 and showing a new exhibition every month, and Little Yengo Gallery, an award-winning, not-for-profit gallery of Aboriginal paintings, artworks and artefacts.

“We're not-for-profit and volunteer-run, created by artists for artists. At Old Fireshed the artist does everything — makes the work, curates it, hangs it, and is there on the day. You're not just looking at an exhibition. You're talking to the person who made it.”

— Chantal Mahoney, President, Wollombi Valley Arts Council

Wollombi Valley draws just 140,000 visitors annually, approximately 1.5 per cent of the Hunter Valley's total. The visitor economy accounts for close to 70 per cent of local revenue. A thousand residents support six galleries, more than 70 exhibiting artists and the state's largest regional sculpture festival.

The Wollombi Art Trail map is available free at all six venues, local cafes and at the Hunter Valley Visitor Information Centre.

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High-resolution map artwork, gallery images and interview access available on request.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- The Wollombi Art Trail connects six independent galleries and studios in Wollombi village. It is coordinated by the VisitWollombi team with the support of the Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce. The venues remain independently owned and operated.
- Wollombi Valley covers approximately 170,000 acres across nine localities — Wollombi, Laguna, Murrays Run, Paynes Crossing, Sweetmans Creek, Dairy Arm, Fernances Crossing, Cedar Creek and Milsons Arm — with a combined population of around 1,000 (ABS, 2021 Census). Much of the valley is national park and state forest.
- The Wollombi Valley Sculpture Festival was established in 2002 and runs biennially. Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of NSW, is Patron. The 2026 Festival offers more than \$80,000 across 12 non-acquisitive prizes and is supported by over 100 volunteers.
- Wollombi is approximately 90 minutes from Sydney and 45 minutes from Newcastle, on Darkinjung, Wonnarua and Awabakal country.
- Historical detail on the 1970s arrival of artists in the valley is drawn from ‘Village life in modern times’, Australian Financial Review, February 2016.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We would like to acknowledge the Wonnarua, Awabakal and Darkinjung people as the traditional custodians of this great valley, Elders past, present and emerging, and Aboriginal people here today. The word Wollombi means “meeting place of the waters”, and it is a site of great indigenous significance as a traditional meeting ground.