

Tropical North



If you had to choose one word to describe Tropical North Queensland it would have to be 'exotic'. It is another country, even for most Australians, with its deep green rainforests and cloud-shrouded misty mountains. It has a strong Italian heritage, due to the migration of canecutters, after both world wars, initially to Innisfail and Ingham, respectively 70 kilometres and 230 kilometres south of Cairns. These towns are generally still strongholds of Italian cuisine and culture. Many canecutters ultimately moved north to Cairns and its hinterland, where they established their own properties, first to grow coffee then tobacco. Now they have returned to coffee production, and many are also engaged in growing tea, as well as fruit for making liqueurs. While the coastal strip has many excellent restaurants, the Cairns Highlands, better known locally as the Atherton Tablelands, are at the heart of primary production.

The following look at the gourmet hotspots of the region starts at Innisfail and takes you in a loop around the Palmerston Highway through Millaa Millaa and Malanda to Atherton on the Kennedy Highway, which leads on to Mareeba then Kuranda. From here the trail heads north along the Captain Cook Highway to Daintree, takes a fascinating look at a tropical fruit farm near Cape Tribulation then returns along the coast, stopping off at the holiday resort towns of Port Douglas and Palm Cove before ending in Cairns for a look at the gourmet scene in this self-proclaimed 'capital' of the north.

The Palmerston Highway from Innisfail runs through the Wet Tropics World Heritage section of the southern highlands. Here waterfalls rush and dive, tea plantations nestle in the foothills and the local wildlife travels via rope skywalks strung above the road. At East Palmerston keep an eye out for the honesty box on the roadside where you can buy fine leaf black **Nucifora Tea** grown by Sybbie Nucifora in the adjacent fields. This laid-back attitude to retail is typical of an area where production comes first and tourism a long second and it makes the area a very genuine place to visit, without billboards or overt signage dragging your attention away from the natural beauty and richness of the land. If you miss the roadside box, Nucifora Tea is also on sale at local shops.

Opposite (top to bottom): dining beneath palms at Nautilus, Port Douglas; spectacular salad of Moreton Bay bugs at Harrisons, Port Douglas



Festivals

Feast of the Senses: food festival; Innisfail; Mar; 0413 010 625; www.feastofthesenses.com.au

Australian Italian Festival: food, music and fun; Ingham Showgrounds; May; (07) 4776 5288; www.australianitalianfestival.com.au

Champagnes of France: Reef House Restaurant, 99 Williams Espl, Palm Cove; June; (07) 4055 3633; www.reefhouse.com.au

Where to stay

Daintree Eco Lodge: world's leading eco lodge; 20 Daintree Rd, Daintree; (07) 4098 6100; www.daintree-ecolodge.com.au

Eden House Retreat and Mountain Spa: luxury cottages and villas; 20 Gillies Hwy, Yungaburra; (07) 4089 7000; www.edenhouse.com.au

Shangri-La: luxury hotel on marina; Pierpoint Rd, Cairns; 1300 733 274; www.cairnsshangrilahotel.com.au

Thala Beach Lodge: secluded deluxe bungalows; Private Rd, Oak Beach (nr Port Douglas); (07) 4098 5700; www.thalabeach.com.au

The Sebel Reef House & Spa: small luxury hotel; 99 Williams Espl, Palm Cove; (07) 4055 3633; www.reefhouse.com.au

Above (left to right): exotic chocolate dessert, and entrance to Ochre Restaurant, in Cairns; tea-producing plant *Camellia sinensis* at the Nerada Tea factory at Malanda; beautifully presented dish of steamed coral trout fillet with a pickled watermelon, cucumber and lobok salad and a Thai fried nahm jim dressing at 2 Fish Seafood Restaurant, Port Douglas



At Milla Milla, further along the highway, the folks at **Mungalli Creek Dairy** call their cheesery and teahouse **Out of the Whey**. It is out of the way too, because you leave the highway on a tiny road and after several curves and under the disinterested gaze of many cows you begin to wonder if you've taken a wrong turn. Then, without fanfare, there's the teahouse in the middle of the cow paddocks, an ideal spot for homemade lunches and morning and afternoon teas. Set aside all thought of cholesterol counts and tuck into a pie made of three different cheeses, or leaven the dairy products with some spinach with your feta in a spanakopita. Follow up with a Quark cheesecake and worry about your arteries tomorrow. Mungalli dairy is certified A Grade Demeter Biodynamic so surely its cheeses can't be bad for you. The dairy produces a vast array of milks, yoghurts, cheese and ice-cream and there are plenty of free tastings.

From here take the Malanda Road and turn right just before the township to the **Nerada Tea** factory, a name probably familiar from supermarket shelves

although you might not have known this is the world's biggest processor of Australian-grown *Camellia sinensis* – that's the bush, also known as the Chinese rose, that produces both green and black tea. In town, the **Malanda Dairy Centre** is part a museum-style tribute to dairy-industry pioneers, and part retail store, selling local coffee, tea, fruit, vegetables, meats and cheese. A restaurant is open for breakfast and lunch and third-generation dairy farmers provide well-informed guided tours of the factory that processes milk and cheese.

Yungaburra, a tiny town that is heritage listed, can also be accessed from Cairns via the winding and picturesque Gillies Highway from Gordonvale. At Yungaburra some people say the boy from Zuoz, Nick Cramer, also deserves a heritage listing for keeping alive his own exuberant Swiss culture at **Nick's Restaurant and Yodeller's Bar**. He trained as a chef in five-star hotels in Europe so the food preparation is skilful. Harking back to the cuisine of his homeland, Nick makes excellent pasta and his Mountaineers Meat Platter of bündnerfleisch and

coppa salami would bring tears of joy to a Swiss mother's eyes. If you're allergic to cow bells and accordion music, avoid Saturday nights, although a bar well stocked with schnapps, grappa, and European and Aussie beers has turned many a silent diner into an unexpected yodeller. 'I can usually tell whether diners would prefer to eat in a quiet place, or maybe be happy for me to bring out the accordion,' Nick says. Follow the sounds of yodelling and Swiss bells at the weekend **Yungaburra Market** (on the fourth Saturday each month) to try some flavoursome bratwurst with all the trimmings at Nick's Sausage Van.

Take the Atherton Road to the **Gallo Dairyland Centre**. The Gallo family had been running a dairy for 70 years without changing much until a European business partner introduced them to Swiss couverture for handmade chocolates and European cheesemaking. Now the cows have to share the limelight with the products of their udders being served in the Gallo cafe in various, mainly lactose-free, guises. The dairy's version of gorgonzola, the

lactose-free Gallozola, is a marvel of pungency with a creamy texture. You can even show your appreciation of the cows by observing the daily milking (3–5pm).

Travel north from Atherton on the Kennedy Highway and stop for lunch or morning and afternoon tea at the **Tolga Woodworks Gallery & Cafe**. It sells well-crafted wood sculptures and its cafe serves home-baked cakes and beautifully prepared fresh Thai, Greek and Tuscan salads, Mediterranean-style vegetable dishes and brilliant soups, all perfect accompaniments to the baked-on-the-premises bread – in a wood-fired oven of course.

Mareeba is in the Dry Tropics of the Cairns Highlands and the centre of Australian coffee growing. Ten minutes before you arrive there, the **Mt Uncle Distillery** is a banana, avocado and macadamia plantation that makes plum, banana, mulberry, coffee and marshmallow liqueurs and a lime cello and lemon cello. Its **Bridges Cafe Tearoom** serves over 50 types of tea to try and buy, and light lunches are served in the licensed premises. At

Above (left to right): oyster shooters at 2 Fish Restaurant, Port Douglas; tropical colours mark the interior of Harrison's at Port Douglas; a work of 'food art' at Salsa Bar and Grill at Port Douglas; duck breast at Ochre Restaurant in Cairns



Mareeba, the **Australian Coffee Centre's** Skybury Plantation produces more than half of Australia's coffee and has a highly sophisticated processing system that has made it a successful niche exporter to some very demanding markets in the United Kingdom and Europe. At the other end of the scale, Bruno Maloberti's **North Queensland Gold Coffee** is an artisan operation where the beans are hand-sorted by Bruno's wife, Luisa, and carefully tended in an antique roaster by their daughter Maria. Look for a small handwritten sign on the gate and mind you don't run over the hens on the driveway. It is interesting to compare the excellent results achieved from two very different processes.

Just past Mareeba, the Nastasi family not only operates one of Far North Queensland's biggest commercial mango plantations but its **Golden Pride Wineries** also made the world's first mango wine in 1999 from plump juicy Kensington Red Mangoes. Visit the plantation, set aside your wine prejudices and taste the wines that now include citrus cellos, mango port and mango liqueur. Just as Europeans

have been making their own traditional fruit brews for years (think about those homemade fruity firewaters produced with a flourish to visitors in France and Italy), these fruit wines are a uniquely Aussie tippie, only here they are made on a commercial scale.

Stay on the Kennedy Highway and head north-east through spectacular countryside to Kuranda. Here cooks will want to shop at the **Village Herb Farm** where a huge range of culinary herbs is grown, mostly using hydroponic methods. The weekend **Speewah Food Market**, 6 kilometres before you arrive in Kuranda, offers great value in avocados, mangos, bananas, pawpaws, citrus, herbs, unusual tropical fruits, honey, organic produce and fresh fish as well as home-cooked goodies.

From Kuranda you head way up north to the world-renowned Daintree Eco Lodge (see *Where to stay*) and its **Julaymba Restaurant**. You're in crocodile country now so it seems only reasonable to eat some (they wouldn't hesitate to return the compliment given half the chance). Julaymba serves

smoked croc in a salad of cucumber, honeydew, chilli, Vietnamese mint, red onion and heart of palm, all with a ginger and mirin dressing. Because of its close relationship with the local Kuku Yalanji people, the restaurant is able to feature a larger than usual range of freshly harvested Indigenous rainforest foods. Lemon myrtle is used with great success on several savoury dishes including a fettuccini tossed with rainforest mushrooms.

At Cubbagudta (it means 'rainy place' in the language of the Kuku Yalanji) Plantation the Nicholas family has been growing tea since 1978. **Daintree Tea** is grown and packaged here and you can visit and take tours but only by prior arrangement. You can buy the tea online and in local stores. It is fine-leaved, delicate and so delicious you can almost taste the fresh falling rain when you brew a pot. A final excursion from here is to Cape Tribulation. Take your vehicle on the cable ferry across the Daintree River to the **Cape Trib Exotic Fruit Farm**, which also has B&B accommodation. Roads are narrow and winding so drive with care. At the farm you can try

many of those exotic tropical fruits that you have only read about (see feature, p. 384).

From Daintree you can drive south and towards the coast to the famous foodie town of Port Douglas. The first and finest restaurant, **Nautilus**, has a star-studded history. The wealthy and powerful eat here, most famously in 1996 when Bill and Hillary Clinton dined at the restaurant. Eat under the stars in a rainforest setting on a soft tropical night and don't even think about the prices, because Nautilus is special-occasion dining at its most romantic. No children are allowed, service is faultless and chef Steve Ritchie watches intently over food leaving the kitchen to ensure its perfection, whether it is fish, duck, fillet of beef, or a lime, coconut and ginger crème brûlée.

Although fish is also on the menu at **Harrison's**, the owner-chef Spencer Patrick brings a particular flair to meat dishes, thanks to years of experience in Michelin-starred restaurants in London. If you've always lusted for a really good chateaubriand then this is where you'll find it with Victorian Black Angus

served with caramelised onions, bone marrow, green beans, truffle mash, red wine jus and sauce béarnaise. The signature dish as far as regulars are concerned is the ox cheek nine-hour red-wine braise with pommes Sardiniere and sauce Bordelaise.

There are more seafood delights at **2 Fish Seafood Restaurant** in the heart of town. Talented chef Tommy Young won a prestigious award for excellence in 2010 so the food must be exceptional. And don't forget to try one of the cocktails while you are there. If you can make a booking ahead of the enthusiastic locals, you're in for a treat behind the timber-slatted louvres of **Salsa Bar and Grill**, where you can dine on the likes of jambalaya, baharat-crusted kangaroo loin and palm sugar and lemongrass oven-baked chicken breast. Decor is simple, there's no silver service or white linen, just good food and a thoroughly tropical laid-back vibe.

Further south again on the way to Cairns, Palm Cove is a major spa resort centre and offers many five-star dining experiences. One of the earliest and still among the best is **Reef House Restaurant** (part of The Sebel Reef House & Spa, see Where to stay) where the waterfront ambience is unmistakably Australian – the restaurant is surrounded by 300-year-old heritage-listed melaleuca trees. With entrée choices such as teppanyaki sea scallop, Vietnamese spanner crab salad, Mediterranean sardine crostini and Japanese beef tataki it can be a challenge to move on to the next course. But the mains are equally diverse and although fish rules here it doesn't have the field to itself with choices such as roast ras el hanout lamb rib eye with prune blini, pumpkin skordalia and dukkah and black label eye steak with gratin potato, pea purée, horseradish sabayon and red wine jus. The wine list includes several varieties that are ideally suited to the tropics, something often overlooked by sommeliers. The resort has a Champagnes of France event in June.

Nu Nu put Palm Cove on the national gourmet map around 2005 and hasn't stopped winning praise and prizes since thanks to its contemporary Mediterranean- and Asian-inspired preparation of fresh ingredients. With its drapes billowing gently in the breeze from the Coral Sea this is a place to relax and forget the rules of everyday life as applied to food. Even breakfast is a spectacular event if you can handle the likes of mud-crab omelettes in the morning. Co-owners Jason Rowbottom and chef

Opposite (top to bottom): feuilleté of asparagus at Harrisons in Port Douglas; eye-catching crab at Ochre Restaurant in Cairns; the Australian Coffee Centre at Mareeba

Nick Holloway describe their food as 'exuberant' and the eight-course tasting menu shows just how far they will go to surprise and delight. It might begin with a fresh Tasmanian truffle, leek and talleggio pie and run through treats such as the Millionaire's Salad, featuring local hearts of palm as well as feeding the soul with Za'atar spiced sesame crusted chicken livers, labna and green harissa broth.

In Cairns, you can match beer to food at the **Blue Sky Brewery** with hearty meals of seafood, pasta, steak, burgers and salads and, naturally, foods cooked in beer, from mussels sautéed in Woody ale to True Blue Stout beer sorbets. If you missed any distilleries in the highlands, you'll probably find their products here. There are daily tours to watch the craftsman-like brewers at work producing the goods that have picked up silver and bronze awards at the Australian International Beer Awards. Patrons tend to be young and enthusiastic and it's a popular backpacker spot.

Bayleaf Balinese Restaurant owner Klaus Ullrich has worked in leading hotels throughout the world since beginning his career in Austria. But it was his two years at the Sheraton Nusa Dua in Bali that led him to open Cairns' only Balinese restaurant. This is the real deal, with all the chefs trained at the Bumbu Bali Restaurant & Cooking School in Bali, and while the cuisine is Balinese they often use native Australian ingredients – crocodile for instance – in food that really suits the climate. The restaurant is part of the Bay Village Tropical Retreat.

Ochre Restaurant is the must-go-to restaurant for corporate types. It has won many national awards since it was established in 1994 and chef Craig Squire is in demand around the world by chefs keen to learn more about Australian food flavourings and how to use them in contemporary dishes. If you've been intrigued by the products you've seen in the region, Ochre has two excellent tasting menus that utilise most of them. If you choose the à la carte, leave room for dessert so you can savour the pungent lemongrass and lime flavour of lemon myrtle in a panna cotta with mango coulis.

Given the amount of produce in the region it's no surprise that food markets abound. In Cairns visit **Rusty's Bazaar** and **Farmgate Markets** for food. **Cairns Ocean Products** is close to the city and has a huge range of local seafood for sale, including wild prawns, reef fish and barramundi. It also packs and seals airline-approved foam chillers.





Tropical fruits

From the abiu to the zapote blanco

If you think that achacha is a Latin American dance, you have a lot to learn about fruit. Tropical North Queensland is the place to educate yourself in this fascinating field of produce that often looks as spectacular as its tastes. Do you like your sapote black or white? The black variety (aka black persimmon) tastes like chocolate pudding and the white sapote (or casimiroa; zapote blanco in its native Mexico) like vanilla custard. From the abiu to the avocado, the salak (its creamy yellow flesh has a flavour suggestive of pineapple) to the sapadilla (a yellow-brown flesh with a caramel or brown sugar taste) and right down to the vanilla bean, there's hardly a letter of the alphabet untouched in the list of fruit growing here. Many varieties are too delicate to ship to capital city markets in far away Australian cities so it's well worth a visit to see and try them where they grow. If possible make that journey north of Daintree to the Cape Trib Exotic Fruit Farm. Otherwise, look for the use of these fruits at restaurants in the region, particularly in cakes, desserts, sauces, custards and cocktails. And the achacha? It is orange-skinned and its pearly white flesh starts with a rush of delicate sweetness on the palate and finishes with a lemony tartness that may well make you feel like dancing for joy.

Contacts for Tropical North

EATERIES

2 Fish Seafood Restaurant: Wharf St, Port Douglas; (07) 4099 6350; www.2fishrestaurant.com.au

Bayleaf Balinese Restaurant: 227 Lake St, Cairns; (07) 4051 4622; www.bayvillage.com.au

Blue Sky Brewery: see Breweries

Bridges Cafe Tearoom: see Wineries/Distilleries/Mt Uncle Distillery

Harrisons: 22 Wharf St, Port Douglas; (07) 4099 4011; www.harrisonsrestaurant.com.au

Julaymba Restaurant: Daintree Eco Lodge, 20 Daintree Rd, Daintree; (07) 4098 6100 or 1800 808 010; www.daintree-ecolodge.com.au

Malanda Dairy Centre: see Stores

Nautilus: 17 Murphy St, Port Douglas; (07) 4099 5330; www.nautilus-restaurant.com.au

Nick's Restaurant and Yodeller's Bar: 33 Gillies Hwy, Yungaburra; (07) 4095 3330; www.nicksrestaurant.com.au

Nu Nu: 123 Williams Espl, Palm Cove; (07) 4059 1880; www.nunu.com.au

Ochre Restaurant: 43 Shields St, Cairns; (07) 4051 0100; www.ochrerestaurant.com.au

Out of the Whey: see Gourmet Produce/Mungalli Creek Dairy

Reef House Restaurant: 99 Williams Espl, Palm Cove; (07) 4055 3633; www.reefhouse.com.au

Salsa Bar and Grill: 26 Wharf St, Port Douglas; (07) 4099 4922; www.salsaportdouglas.com.au

Tolga Woodworks Gallery & Cafe: Kennedy Hwy, Tolga; (07) 4095 4488; www.tolgawoodworks.com.au

STORES

Malanda Dairy Centre: 8 James St, Malanda; (07) 4095 1234

MARKETS

Farmgate Markets: Pier Shopping Centre, Pierpoint Rd, Cairns; Sat

Rusty's Bazaar Market: 64 Sheridan St, Cairns; Fri morning, Sat-Sun; (07) 4051 5100; www.rustysmarkets.com.au

Speewah Food Market: Speewah (nr Kuranda); Sun; (07) 4093 0361

Yungaburra Market: 19 Eacham Rd; 4th Sat each month, morning; (07) 4095 2111; www.yungaburramarkets.com

GOURMET PRODUCE

Australian Coffee Centre: Skybury Plantation, 94-136 Ivicvic Rd, Mareeba; (07) 4093 2194; www.skybury.com.au

Cairns Ocean Products: Comport St, Portsmith; (07) 4031 3277; www.cairnsocanproducts.com.au

Cape Trib Exotic Fruit Farm: Lot 5 Nicole Dr, Cape Tribulation; (07) 4098 0057; www.capetrib.com.au

Daintree Tea: Cape Tribulation Rd, Cow Bay; (07) 4098 9139; www.daintreetea.com

Gallo Dairyland Centre: Malanda Rd, Atherton; (07) 4095 2388; www.galloydairyland.com.au

Mungalli Creek Dairy: 251 Brooks Rd, Millaa Millaa; (07) 4097 2232; www.mungallicreekdairy.com.au

Nerada Tea: Visitor Centre, 933 Glen Allyn Rd, Malanda; (07) 4096 8328; www.neradatea.com.au

North Queensland Gold Coffee: Wheelbarrow Way, Dimbulah; (07) 4093 2269; www.nqgoldcoffee.com.au

Nucifora Tea: 2402 Palmerston Hwy, East Palmerston, Innisfail; (07) 4061 8151 or 0418 456 309; www.nuciforatea.com.au

Village Herb Farm: 8 Green Hills Rd; Kuranda; (07) 4093 7482; www.villageherb.com.au

WINERIES/DISTILLERIES

Golden Pride Wineries: 227 Bilwon Rd, Mareeba; (07) 4093 2750; www.goldendrop.com.au

Mt Uncle Distillery: 1819 Chewko Rd, Walkamin; (07) 4086 8008; www.mtuncle.com

BREWERIES

Blue Sky Brewery: 34-42 Lake St, Cairns; (07) 4057 0500; www.blueskybrewery.com.au