For an island nation whose population largely inhabits the coastline, Australia has a strange relationship with seafood. Apart from the occasional fish and chips and lunchtime encounters with ubiquitous fast food sushi boxes and hand rolls we don’t seem to value fish that much. Fish is not something on dinner party menus or ever considered as a worthy substitute for the Sunday family roast, yet a whole salmon would amply feed a large family. Australians are meat lovers through and through. We consume about 90 kilograms per person per year, beating both the United States and Argentina, the two other meat hungry nations. Yep, we finally got the gold medal for meat eating. By comparison the stats on seafood consumption are around 15 kilograms per person per year, which includes frozen, smoked and canned seafood. Despite this there is a bit of a love affair for some people with fresh salmon. Health conscious types will regularly buy fillets of farmed salmon but any suggestion they try another variety of fish or, heaven forbid, a whole fish with head attached, will likely put them out of their comfort zone. As a consequence roughly a third of display cabinets at some fish mongers is given over to salmon fillets (New Zealand and Australian) and ocean trout fillets. A lot of our seafood is also imported, not just the fresh fish fillets and prawns you seen at Queen Victoria market but all the frozen, packaged and processed stuff we buy at supermarkets. We are net importers of seafood despite an abundance of local seafood and a large fishing industry. This skewed consumer demand coupled with our expanding fresh seafood exports and loss of commercial fisheries in Port Phillip Bay has reduced the availability of the best Australian seafood for Melbourne consumers, which is a real shame. I’ve really noticed this dramatic change in the last couple of years and it has affected the number of seafood meals I cook, down from three to one a week on average. Even
this devoted foodie is finding it difficult, having to travel further afield for my seafood and with no guarantee of quality. If you don’t have an established rapport with a fish monger it can be a bit of a lottery; it’s hard to judge the freshness of a fish without its head on and if I ask if the fish is fresh what do you think the answer will be. One shining light has been the Japanese grocers (Hinoki, Collingwood and Suzuran, Camberwell) that sell sashimi grade blocks of salmon, tuna and kingfish of exceptional quality. I almost always eat it raw because it is such a shame to cook it but the fish is excellent gently poached for a few minutes or sliced thinly and tossed through hot pasta with cherry tomatoes, herbs and EVOO. It can be much harder to obtained quality seafood outside of the major cities but I have had some memorable seafood purchases while holidaying on the coast of Victoria, NSW, Queensland and Tasmanian. Bermagui on the NSW Saphire coast has a wonderful seafood co-op, Bluewave, where the days catch is varied and oh so fresh. Bluewave have the regulation fish and chip cafe but further in there is a counter full of fish, some with their heads on. I was delighted too by the unshucked oysters available at nearby Smithies oyster farm. There are probably other great seafood sellers along this coast, so it is wise to do a bit of fishing around. It’s so sad to think what towns along the East coast of Australia have been going through with the devastating bushfires this summer. I hope holiday makers return very soon to help rebuild local economies. Portland in Western Victoria is the home of the Portland rock lobster, a major export earner for the region. Despite this, not all of these beauties are packed and air freighted to Asian markets, there are still plenty available to locals and tourists, alive and kicking in holding tanks out back of the Portland Fish Market shop or, if you prefer, cooked ones are for sale too. In Tassie a great place to pick up a local crayfish is at a roadside van. Paired with a regional cool climate sparkling wine your holiday is made. However buying fish along the Australian coast is often tricky and the best fish may not be at a town fish shop.
Yamba, in Northern NSW, at the mouth of the Clarance River, is noted for superb king prawns but when I was there the fish shop seemed to cater more for fish and chip lovers, so when I inquired about Yamba prawns I was sent to the butcher to buy the local green prawns. This inability to buy fresh seafood for cooking yourself I also encountered on Kangaroo Island, a supposed foodie destination. Again, the main offering was fish and chips. If you want to make your own crumbed whiting with a lovely green salad or BBQ chilli prawns to eat with a cooling mango salsa then you have to work at the procurement side of things. In some small towns it’s best to look for the local fisherman rather than a fish shop; he may have a tatty sign on the road and a large fridge in the garage but no obvious shop front. You may have to be a bit patient as fishing depends on weather conditions. Take time to chat to get a sense of local conditions. Express your ichthyophilia and you’re likely to be told to come back on a certain day for that day’s catch. Consider it sort of hunting and gathering or retail fishing; when you hook one it’s worth the effort but really it shouldn’t be so hard in a land girt by sea.