



STRAIGHT
FROM
THE
OVERNS

FARM GATE TO DINNER PLATE

Country cuisine in northeast Victoria's Ovens Valley isn't limited to red wine and lamb chops. Photographer **Ewen Bell** follows a trail of treasures that starts at the farm gate and ends in local restaurants, a trail abundant with enough seasonal surprises to fill a small European nation.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT // A foggy morning southwest of Bright, when just the cows (and photographers) are awake; chatty goats at Myrtleford; tractors and apples in Stanley, southeast of Beechworth; Michael Ryan runs The Provenance in Beechworth; ducks among the shiraz vines at Milawa; fresh chestnuts sold on the roadside near Bright.

Goats are chatty creatures. Place a dozen or so in a pen and they'll banter and bleat to each other endlessly. Just as one winds up, another butts in. On a small farm south of Myrtleford, the sun is about to disappear into the distance, bathing this herd in hues of pink and orange, as though someone has tossed in tomatoes and saffron before gently stirring.

Not all goats are grown the same. These new blends of Boers are friendly little creatures, curious to meet strangers and, I'm sorry, but cute enough to eat. Local chef Cate Hardman agrees. "Not everyone wants to see their dinner while it's dancing around the farm, but in the kitchen I think it's important to know where your produce comes from. We don't buy cuts of goat, we get them whole and we use all of it."

Cate is Head Chef at Brown Brothers Epicurean Centre, and her challenge is to serve cuisine to match the standard of award-winning wines. The Brown family has been experimenting with Italian varieties for several decades, looking for new elements that work well with the soils of the surrounding valleys. Cate has also been experimenting with the Italians,

Enroute from Mary's orchard in Whorouly to Cate's kitchen at Milawa, the fruit passes by walnut farms and olive groves, possibly to meet again over lunch in the near future.

discovering a world of traditional foods that have been forgotten by many modern kitchens.

One source of produce was unearthed in her very own kitchen, a chef on the team at Brown Brothers whose mother has a green thumb and a generous heart. Mary and her husband migrated to Australia, bringing with them a specialised set

of traditional farming practices. They ripen red tomatoes in the greenhouse, harvest cactus pears along the driveway and pick persimmons from their orchards.

Different varieties of persimmon turn a range of golden colours when ripe, their autumn leaves matching the skin of the fruit. If this is an attempt by the trees to camouflage their sweet gifts, there's no fooling Mary; she plucks me a handful of colour and explains the difference between the old and new varieties. Modern markets prefer the solid flesh that has a firm bite like an apple, while the traditional trees produce fruit that is small, soft and syrupy to the core.

Small is good. Small is juicy, like jelly.

AUTUMN IN THE OVENS

The travelling distance from Mary's orchard in Whorouly to Cate's kitchen at Milawa is less than 20 minutes. Enroute, the fruit passes by walnut farms and olive groves, possibly to meet again over lunch in the near future.

North of Milawa, the Beechworth road cuts through iconic rural scenery, farmland that has

been in the same families for generations. The colours of the landscape are muted, softened in recent years by too much sun and not enough rain. Another long, alarming summer has left fields and paddocks tinged yellow and brown. Tall grasses stand in recognition of when last the rains *did* come, their golden stems making waves in the





wind. At dawn the sun saturates the landscape just that little bit more, enough to make mountains turn a shade of rust that matches the windmills.

The mornings are getting very cool by the time autumn arrives in the Ovens. The drop in ground temperature is the cue for crocus bulbs to bloom, signalling a start to the saffron season in Stanley. Saffron emerges from the ground in the form of little flowers, the brilliant orange stigma hidden inside a curtain of purple petals.

Standing in a field of saffron is much like standing in a field of weeds. It's not as though the earth is covered in swathes of colour; rather, a few odd plants poke slender green leaves into the air, occasionally sending up a bloom as well. Michael Nuck has a saffron shack on his farm, an elaborately renovated shed designed to house his enthusiasms.

The scale of Michael's harvest is limited by his own two hands. Each flower is fastidiously sprung open and the stigma of saffron teased away with care. On a good morning there might be hundreds of blooms to be tended one by one. The work is tedious, a test of sanity that Michael greets with a smile before moving on to the next blossom. At the end of the season he'll have three glass jars sitting on the shelf, filled with orange curls.

Small is good. Small is sweet and aromatic.

CHEF MEETS FARMER

Michael opens one of the jars and the fragrance surges out, deep and rich like the colour of the stigma. Now I see the difference between season-fresh saffron and the morsels that have been sitting in my pantry for the past two years. Restaurateurs know the difference too. Chefs have to be careful to avoid overpowering the dish with such a potent

spice. A defenceless Catalunyan stew is no match for the pervasive fragrance possessed by saffron.

According to Michael, "To get the best flavour you want to dry roast the saffron in a hot pan, then splash in some white wine. It releases the essence in full. A little goes a long way."

There are no sales for passing motorists at Michael's farm gate; it's hidden behind forests and dirt roads that have few signposted names. His saffron dream would be a mystery if not for the Stanley Pub, where little vials of his produce are sold with a few notes and a recipe to inspire cooks at home. It was in here that Beechworth restaurateur Michael Ryan discovered the unusually sweet source of saffron.

When Michael met Michael, it was a match made in culinary heaven, the relationship between chef and farmer one of mutual inspiration. Ryan has been a notable chef in the region for nearly a decade, and has recently taken over a majestic restaurant in Beechworth called The Provenance. Local produce has been a foundation of his reputation, offering seasonal menus that highlight the ripe and raucous flavours of the valley. Some of his most unique ingredients are not just wildly fresh, they're just plain wild.

Ryan has a friend who forages in the forests to find fresh mushrooms for his cuisine. On the day I met Franca, she was carrying a cardboard box filled to the brim with "saffron milk caps". They're a subtle orange colour and were picked young – hundreds of small mushrooms each the size of a button.

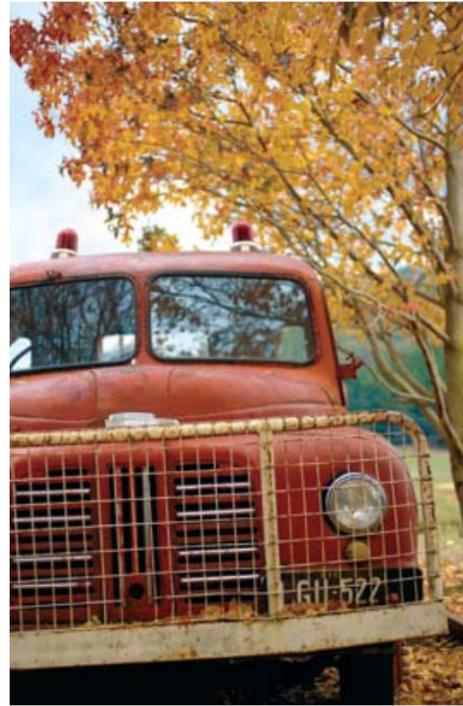
Small is good. Small is full of flavour.

MAINTAINING THE OLD WAYS

Franca can head out into the valley armed with nothing more than a pocketknife and return with

Michael Ryan has been a notable chef in the region for nearly a decade. Local produce has been a foundation of his reputation, offering seasonal menus that highlight the ripe and raucous flavours of the valley.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT // A pretty farm gate in Oxley, west of Milawa; a tiny chapel in Milawa; saffron guru Michael Nuck; fresh cherries from Oxley; herding cattle outside Milawa; Harrietville in autumn; saffron milk cap mushies from Myrtleford.



Almost everything that hits the table has been homemade – cherries are pickled with cloves and cinnamon, olive bread is baked in their ovens and even the vinegar is prepared according to a family recipe.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT // Chestnut-fed pigs from Bright; an old red truck finds a happy resting place on a deer farm in Bright; a beautiful foggy morning in Buckland, southwest of Bright; plump persimmons from Mary's orchard in Whorouly; the great Patrizia Simone, who has been serving fine Italian cuisine in Bright for a decade; the Harrietville trout farm; an old abandoned farmhouse near Beechworth.

tubs of treats. If not orange buds, then little nails or slippery jacks. There are literally dozens of mushrooms and fungi that make an appearance through the seasons, but you have to know where to find them. Franca's father, Angelo, is the family font of knowledge; a migrant from southern Italy who came to Australia with an eye for what grows wild. Most of the locals know well enough to avoid any bright red toadstools that emerge beneath the chestnut trees, but beyond that there's little common awareness of how to collect or cook them.

Franca and Ryan frequently chat about the mushrooms, exchanging their experience on preparations to make them perfect for the palette. After a suitable regime of salting and soaking, most mushrooms respond well to a frying pan and butter – better still with two or three varieties cooked together. Many of the mushrooms are best enjoyed once pickled. Ryan boils them in vinegar to soften the fibres, then packs them in olive oil to store.

The traditional technique of preserving without preservatives can find many uses in the kitchen, adding a little touch of something unique to The Provenance. The words "wild mushroom" written on a menu is deceptively plain.

Preserving and processing your own basic foods was once a necessity in the Ovens Valley. Patrizia Simone and her husband George have been serving fine Italian cuisine in Bright for a decade, and many of the distinctive dishes on the menu reflect a time when families had to be a little more self-sufficient. Italians are very good at not just preserving foods, but enhancing the flavours in the process – all without the use of chemicals and additives, employing traditional methods to bring out the best flavour.

The humble pig can be fed on chestnuts before being processed into dry-cured prosciutto. Goats and trout are smoked to temper their sturdy flavours. Seasonal fruits are preserved



to keep them on the shelf for consumption in leaner months. The Simone family still do all these things. They're passionate about their food long before it reaches the kitchen, and almost everything that hits the table has been homemade – cherries are pickled with cloves and cinnamon, olive bread is baked in their ovens and even the vinegar is prepared according to a family recipe.

It all starts with fresh produce and they don't have to drive far to get it. Trout are grown in ponds a few miles away in Harrietville, ponds fed with water that has travelled directly from Mount Feathertop via the Ovens River, untarnished by farmland. Berries, walnuts and honey are traded by the roadside at dozens of farms around Bright, along with a forest of chestnuts sold by the kilo. You won't see them featured often on city menus, but chestnuts have a soft spot among restaurateurs in the region.

Patrizia is particular about her chestnuts – some varieties are better for peeling while others split apart nicely when roasted. They offer a subtle taste, plus the ability to absorb flavours from more complex dishes. Michael in Beechworth does his chestnuts with duck; Gate in Milawa prepares a chestnut paste for her Mont Blanc dessert; Patrizia in Bright uses them to make pasta, stuffing and soups. At their simplest, they're enjoyed roasted and served with a sweet wine, usually shared with family and neighbours.

My final feast before leaving the valley is with Patrizia, her husband George and son Anthony, who has been working in the kitchen at Simone's for nearly six years. Marsala-poached chestnuts are served alongside homemade Italian sausages, fresh gnocchi cooked in a Napoli sauce from local tomatoes and a salad with tiny preserved pears to soften the sharpness of rocket leaves. Anthony will have to work hard to exceed the reputation of his mother, but he's well on his way.

On a single table sits decades of culture – a blend of hardworking migrants and their seasonal harvests, a happy marriage between rural Australia and European cuisine. Visitors to the region usually come to sample the wine, but the best the Ovens has to offer doesn't come from a bottle, it comes out of the kitchen. Buon appetito! ■



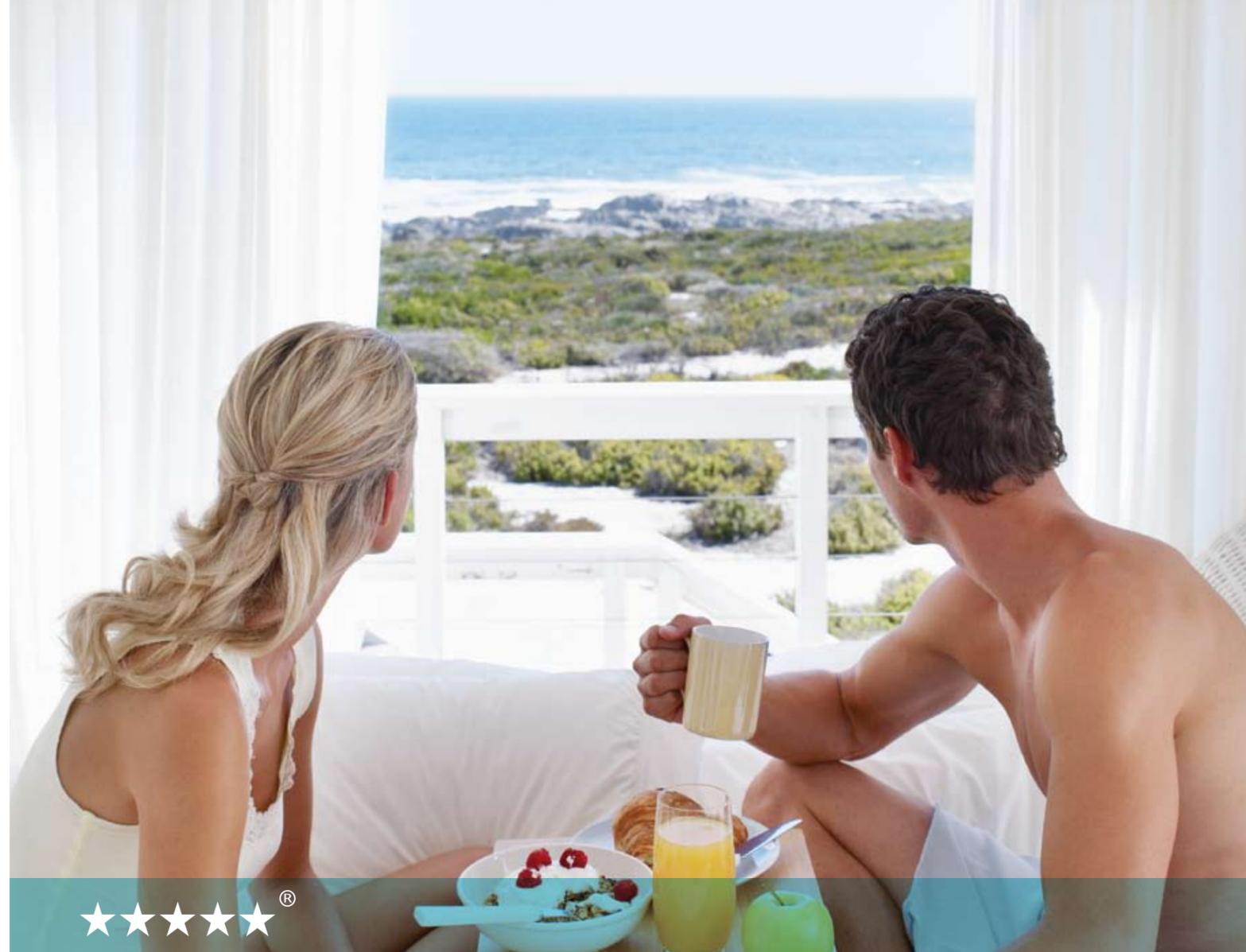
◎ DETAILS // STRAIGHT FROM THE OVENS

► The Ovens Valley food and wine region is in northeast Victoria and reaches southeast from Wangaratta to Harrietville past Mount Buffalo National Park, and includes such towns as Oxley, Milawa, Everton, Beechworth, Stanley, Whorouly, Myrtleford, Ovens itself, Porepunkah, Buckland, Bright and Wandiligong.

◎ CONTACTS //

- SIMONE'S OF BRIGHT // 03 5755 2266.
- THE PROVENANCE // www.theprovenance.com.au, 03 5728 1786.
- BROWN BROTHERS EPICUREAN CENTRE // www.brownbrothers.com.au, 03 5720 5540.
- SNOWLINE FRUITS // 03 5728 6584.
- MOUNTAIN FRESH TROUT AND SALMON FARM // 03 5759 2558.
- THE AUSTRALIAN CHESTNUT COMPANY // www.chestnuts.com.au, 03 5756 2788.

LEFT // This tumble-down former church near Bright perfectly reflects the autumn feel of the region.



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