

Leanne Nicolle, an intern at the SAGE community garden in Moruya, NSW, harvests rhubarb to be sold at the weekly farmers' market.

STORY BY AMANDA BURDON

IN SEASON

AUSTRALIA'S FARMERS
ARE DELIVERING FOOD IN
NEW AND OLD WAYS.

STUART WHITELAW

IS EXCITED THAT POTATOES ARE BACK ON THE MENU. NOT JUST ANY POTATOES, BUT CREAMY EARLY SEBAGO SPUDS GROWN AT DEUA FARM, ON THE FERTILE RIVER FLATS JUST 5KM UPSTREAM OF HIS HOME NEAR MORUYA, ON THE NSW SOUTH COAST.



He's fresh from the town's Tuesday farmers' market, having filled his basket with potatoes, fennel, beetroot, cauliflower, broccoli, blueberries, stout bread, and full-cream Jersey milk and cheeses – all grown and made by people he knows, no further than 20km away.

"The joy of our market is that it has brought us back into the rhythm of the growing cycle, eating whatever is in season," says Stuart, a retired architect, artist and keen home gardener, who helped establish the market. "You can buy just about everything you need – seafood, meat, dairy and vegetables – and it's true local food. I know exactly where it came from and the values of the people who produced it."

Vegetable production – mostly corn, tomatoes, beans and potatoes – was a mainstay of the Eurobodalla Shire economy throughout the 1950s and '60s. But mechanisation and larger-scale agricultural production put paid to most of the small market gardens that quilted the coastal strip. It became nearly impossible for residents to buy anything grown locally.

Then, in 2009, came not-for-profit community organisation SAGE (Sustainable Agriculture and Gardening Eurobodalla) with a bold plan: to inspire home gardeners to get their hands dirty and grow a commercial food supply.

"We wanted to become much more self-sufficient locally and to recapture and share the knowledge and expertise of the old farmers before it was lost," Stuart says. "But any food system is about a lot more than food. It's also about growing the community."

SAGE started by establishing a community garden on Moruya's outskirts and offering education and workshops to empower locals to garden and cook. It appointed an intern to tend the garden and established a Seed Savers group to preserve heirloom varieties adapted to the regional climate. Very soon, small-scale food enterprises began to flourish and, in 2013, the farmers' market germinated in this rich soil.

It's been a boon to the community. The market turns over an estimated \$1.7 million a year and injects a further \$1.4 million into the regional economy. "When people are eating well, it leads to a healthy community," Stuart says. "We have proven the viability of small-scale farmers living off 1ha, but we've also provided an important means of social connectivity. Our market is the reason why people now move here."

▲ **Farmers' markets**, such as this one at Moruya, are bringing together people to make conscious food choices and reward local growers for their efforts.

▲ **Stuart Whitelaw** (top) helps drive the local food production revival in Moruya, where the farmers' market and community garden gather support.

LOCAL FOOD. Slow food. Fair food. Across Australia, a quiet revolution is underway. New and not-so-new farming methods are satisfying a growing hunger for food produced in environmentally sustainable, ethical and socially responsible ways. From pastured eggs to organic fruit and vegetables and carbon-neutral meat, a small but passionate crop of farmers is delivering food they say is kinder to the Earth and animals. Concentrated in densely populated regions within reach of major cities, they are slowly starting to carve out profitable niche markets and inject vitality into regional communities, determined to put the culture back into agriculture.

"The public is clamouring for our food; they want to know their farmers and where and how their food is produced," says Victorian pig farmer Tammi Jonas, president of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, which advocates for ethical and sustainable farming practices. "A growing number of Australians are also devoting their lives to growing sustainable produce. They want to contribute to a better future for everyone, and this will continue to grow as we see more public health issues and ecological destruction."

Sarah Hyland from the Australian Institute of Food Science and Technology highlights the bigger geopolitical, economic, ►



Newly plucked radishes from the SAGE community garden in Moruya, NSW, are typical of the low-food-mileage, ethical produce finding favour.

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Litters of piglets like this one roam together freely on the Jonai family farm in VIC, which prides itself on humane animal husbandry practices.

▼ Laura Riccardi and Jakub Kotulek pack boxes of fruit and vegetables for customers of Food Connect, the collective distribution hub based in Salisbury, QLD.



▲ Food Connect collective CEO Rob Pekin believes the cost of fair food should be independent of market forces, and reflect the true ecological price of year-round production.

environmental and social forces at work. “Throughout the world we are seeing a change in the social values around food,” she says. “After 9/11 and the GFC, especially, people became frightened and retreated to more retrospective thinking. Concerns about food safety and security mean we want more transparency and we’re questioning whether conventional farming is sustainable.”

A 2015 Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation report predicts that by 2050 wealthier and better informed consumers will expect food to be nothing less than healthy, nutritious, clean, green and ethically produced. It foreshadows technology giving shoppers a greater ability to “selectively access, share and validate information about products”, enabling Australian rural industries to “increase market share by communicating the provenance, ethics, environmental performance and healthiness of their crop and livestock products”.

That’s already happening, to some extent, courtesy of farmers’ markets and direct distribution systems – such as food hubs, convergences, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprises, farmers’ cooperatives and collectives – that have sprouted around the country.

Jane Adams, Australian Farmers’ Markets Association national spokesperson, says at least 180 farmers’ markets now operate in Australia and, although it’s difficult to estimate national annual turnover, takings for April 2016 from just 56 markets exceeded \$70 million. “Farmers’ markets not only showcase regional produce; they help develop a regional identity and are a powerful platform for community engagement,” Jane says. “They provide enormous economic and social stimulus to their communities, and are wonderful business incubators. The cost of participation is very low and it’s a very supportive environment for producers starting out and trying to build a brand. They’ve helped create agricultural diversity and have saved many family farms.”

At farmers’ markets, shoppers are discussing provenance and food miles, climatic changes and artisanal products that preserve age-old techniques. Some consumers have become so inspired they invest more deeply in food security and integrity, by subscribing to CSA enterprises and directly sharing in the risks and

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rewards of farming. Opportunities are also opening up for collaboration across supply chains, with the development of on-farm and regional processing, and food hubs to aggregate sales.

A pioneer of collective distribution is Food Connect, a social enterprise that began in Brisbane and recently expanded into Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. It pays ecological farmers about four times what they could earn from supermarkets and distributes their produce in boxes through a ‘City Cousins’ network. Founder Robert Pekin, a dairy farmer who was forced off his farm in the late 1990s, says the massive power of Australia’s supermarket duopoly and their ‘down, down’ pricing philosophy has made it difficult for smaller farmers to compete.

“But, increasingly, [farmers] are being encouraged to be better than organic and much more holistic in their practices, to connect with each other, their customers and their community,” Robert says. “Our system has built solidarity, given them ways to share, and given them hope.”

AT 82 YEARS of age, Bob Davie can hardly be described as a ‘new breed’ of farmer. But the vast experience and knowledge this Phillip Island producer has amassed during more than 65 years raising cattle has led to some of the most progressive practices you can get. “We have always enjoyed a challenge and have tried to lead by example,” Bob says. “Fifty years ago we built one of the first herringbone dairies in Victoria and we’ve always tried to do everything as best we can for the environment. It’s best-practice agriculture and should be the way it’s done everywhere.”

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▼ **Just outside** Daylesford, VIC, Tammi Jonas works in her farm's meatworks, which was financed by crowdfunding and supplies pork to members of a Community Supported Agriculture enterprise.



▲ **One of Bob Davie's** prized bulls moves in for a gentle pat at the carbon-neutral Bimbadeen, where Bob's Gippsland Natural Beef is raised according to stringent environmental standards.

In 2001 Bob and his wife, Anne, joined the producer-owned cooperative Gippsland Natural Beef to sell grass-fed meat direct to butchers, restaurants, homes and workplaces. All 35 Gippsland Natural suppliers abide by the environmental management system ISO14001 and sell their meat under the Enviromeat brand. The system monitors impacts of their farming (including animal welfare, pasture management and water use), and the standards that must be met for Meat Standards Australia grading.

Bob and Anne have taken things even further. Their farm Bimbadeen was declared carbon neutral in July 2014 and the couple now hopes to make history by becoming the first farmers in Australia to derive an income from carbon sequestration. They have begun negotiations for trading on the voluntary scheme (offsetting greenhouse gas emissions of Melbourne clients of Gippsland Natural) and are almost ready to begin exporting their carbon-neutral product. "Bimbadeen has proven the carbon sequestration methods, increasing total organic carbon (TOC) from 160 to 220 tonnes in a trial paddock, and sound management has improved the TOC levels in other paddocks across our property," Bob says. "Farmers have the ability to dramatically increase soil carbon in Gippsland; it's sitting under the ground like a bank, earning interest as it builds. Australian farmers have an opportunity to be on the front foot to mitigate the impacts of climate change and these actions will be viewed positively by consumers, particularly younger generations. It's a win for producers and the environment."

As well as organic and biodynamic certification, some of our most progressive food producers are moving to peer-review testing of their environmental performance or banding together for third-party accreditation. Outside Warwick, in Queensland, grass-fed beef producers Helen and Ian Lewis have been conducting their own biological monitoring for the past five years at Picots Farm and are now looking to formalise that process.

Internationally certified Holistic Management educator Helen says using holistic-planned grazing (where animals are moved around to regenerate pastures) has boosted carbon levels to 4 per cent – a great base for food production and increasing plant

"You feel good that you are producing food, the healthiest food you can."

diversity. She believes the take-up of such landscape stewardship is growing in livestock production. "It's slowly becoming mainstream, as many people are starting to adopt a version of planned grazing, and our national grazing bodies are starting to see how important it is for maintaining groundcover," she says. Farmers adopting more regenerative practices are motivated by improving the land, as well as food quality and provenance for customers. "People want to be proud of what they produce and many farmers want to know their customers," Helen says. "People who can verify they are producing naturally invite people to visit their farm. It's an open gate."

"For us, holistic management is a decision-making process that ensures social, financial and environmental outcomes. You feel good that you are producing food, the healthiest food you can. Our techniques address the root causes of environmental damage and that represents a massive saving for us in inputs. It also means we can forward plan and have cash flow. It allows producers, people and businesses to be green but in the black."

WHEN IT COMES to food miles, Melshell Oysters is hard to beat. "It's about 100m," Cassie Melrose says. "You can't get fresher." It was a gamble, two years ago, when Cassie and her husband, Ian, an oyster farmer of 35 years, spruced up a vintage caravan for selling their family's oysters direct to the public from their Dolphin Sands lease, 15km from Swansea, Tasmania. They had successful wholesale markets in Melbourne, Sydney, and as far north as Cairns, but their growing family needed a different business model. ▶

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Plump Melshell oysters are plucked straight from the nearby Swan River for people who stop to buy them at the Melrose family's quirky retail outlet in TAS.

▼ **Relishing contact** with their customers, the friendly faces of Cassie and Ian Melrose, of Melshell Oysters, are regularly seen at the farm gate shop where they sell directly to the public just metres from their lease.



“I thought we would be lucky to get five customers a day, and it was slow going at first, but it’s just got bigger and bigger,” Cassie says. Now they daily get 30 cars and sell 40 dozen oysters. To shuck and slurp down fresh oysters metres from where they were grown, in the Swan River, is part of the appeal, but something more keeps customers returning. “It’s easy to sell a good product, but people really seem to enjoy the interaction with us,” Cassie says. “It’s very intimate and they want to hear the story of how the oysters are grown and see where they are produced.”

The Melroses are thrilled to be keeping some Tassie produce on the island for visitors to enjoy. “When we were selling into the wholesale market, our oysters were a commodity,” Cassie says. “We had no connection with the people who ate them. Now, Melshell Oysters are a brand and have a reputation, to the point where we have to limit the number of restaurants we supply, to guarantee enough for the van. It’s about providing people with a memory, and we want the experience to sparkle for them. It’s a lot of fun meeting people and the feedback has been amazing: it makes you stand a little taller.”

To reduce food miles and guarantee ethical production, some Australian farmers are now doing their own on-site processing. To finance their Victorian farm butcher shop, the Jonas family, who butcher, cook and cure pork and beef grown on their Jonai Farms pastures outside Daylesford, turned to crowdfunding. In 2013, 166 people pledged almost \$30,000 for ‘ethical pork rewards’ and became their first CSA members. A second crowdfunding appeal, to add a commercial curing room for making charcuterie, was equally successful. “Other producers are now using crowdfunding to finance major infrastructure and it makes perfect sense,” Tammi says. “When we’re not using our boning room, our neighbouring duck producers use it. We’re seeing more livestock farmers sharing resources, storage and distribution outlets in this way, like we’ve seen in market gardening.” Under the CSA model, people buy shares in a farm’s projected harvest in advance and receive regular deliveries during the season. It gives the farmer economic security, guaranteed sales and cost savings. The consumer enjoys access to seasonal food aligned with their personal values – the Jonases, for example, allow their pigs to free-range in family groups and slaughter

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them humanely. It has proven so successful that the family has closed membership at 80 and has a 20-year waiting list.

“A CSA takes traceability to a new level,” Tammi says. “When people joined our CSA we became their farmers and the farm became their farm, and they use that language. We have a CSA open day coming up, where we will get together, do some cooking and share our profit-loss statements. It’s not achievable everywhere, but it’s the absolute epitome of fair food – a solidarity economy with no middle people, characterised by incredible transparency, communication and trust. And you’re not seeking to grow beyond the land’s capacity, just enough to supply your members.”

But the economic viability of small-scale production remains a challenge for many. Fraser Bayley, who with his partner, Kirsti Wilkinson, grows vegetables on 2.5ha at their Old Mill Road BioFarm in Moruya, says margins are tight. Sharing resources and marketing helps. They collaborate with other producers to deliver boxed vegetables to residential customers and direct to restaurants and cafes, and are working to establish a food hub for the Canberra region. “As volume increases, we may have to look at a cooperative structure,” Fraser says. “But you will only enjoy this lifestyle if it pays the bills. You need to be of sufficient scale but not too big; it’s a question of finding the sweet spot.”

For Katie and Hugh Finlay, of Mt Alexander Fruit Gardens in Harcourt, Victoria, that quest has seen them form an alliance of certified organic producers. In an Australian first, they are about to lease their orchard to a young farmer, whom they will mentor, and open up the rest of their 25ha property for the establishment of a micro-dairy, market garden and heritage fruit-tree nursery. “It is both a growth plan and a succession plan for our farm,” says Katie of the alliance, which will give the couple more time to devote to their online education and training business. “If we can get the model to work, we think it will help to connect landless farmers with retiring farmers without a succession plan.”

PRODUCTION OF Oak and Swan Sourdough in South Gippsland, Victoria, is a virtuous loop. Betsy and Greg Evans source wheat, spelt and rye from organic and bio-dynamic growers. Greg mills the flour and Betsy makes the loaves (all organic) by hand and bakes them in their wood-fired bakery. Their energy costs are low – wood fuel is collected on the property and some remaining power needs are met by solar.

“Eventually we would like to get off the grid,” says Betsy, who learnt baking from her mother and grandmother. “Bread never used to take that much energy to produce; it was a communal thing and we don’t want those traditional skills to be lost. We support the growers who take the extra time and care



At Oak and Swan Sourdough, in South Gippsland, Betsy Evans feeds her wood-fired oven with loaves made according to time-honoured traditions.

to avoid the use of chemicals, and we favour the heritage grains, which have more flavour and are more nutritious. People often say to me that our bread reminds them of bread they used to get in Europe 30 years ago.”

The Evanses would one day like to grow grain themselves, but for now are busy enough baking 300 loaves a week for sale through farmers’ markets, a food hub and health food shops. They might consider community shared baking, where customers order and pay for loaves in advance. “I can also see us opening to the public one or two days a week, for workshops and so people can buy bread fresh from the oven,” Betsy says. “There is much more awareness around eating today and meeting those who eat our bread is very rewarding. You feel like you have another family out there and get to know them and their kids, who are learning that bread isn’t all square and white.”

FRASER BAYLEY WAS new to farming a decade ago and has seen a profound change in attitudes to it in that time. “People are now wanting to farm and proving they can do it differently and create a demand for a different kind of product,” he says. “The cost of land and the investment required to become a mid-size farmer is beyond most people these days. But smaller, local production is a way it can be done – on a scale that allows stewardship of the land and access to good-quality food.”

In 2013 the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development advocated a shift towards “mosaics of sustainable, regenerative production systems that also considerably improve the productivity of small-scale farmers”. In reporting on food security in a changing climate, it recommended we see farmers not only as producers of agricultural goods, but as managers of

agro-ecological systems that provide public goods and services, such as water, soil, energy and biodiversity.

While he continues to support the large-scale food revolution, Fraser believes action can be most effective at the local or regional level. “There’s a view that ‘peasant farming’ won’t feed the world, but I think in time we will be able to,” he says. “In the meantime, we can feed our communities. To see people turning farms around and making them profitable, and the environment being repaired while they are making a living, is a wonderful legacy.”

While Katie Finlay concedes that the percentage of food sold through farmers’ markets and even food hubs such as Food Connect is still a drop in the ocean, she says that means there is plenty of room for growth. “The consumption of organic food is growing at about 7 per cent per annum globally,” she says. “The tide hasn’t turned yet, but consumers are becoming aware of the true cost of food production – financially and environmentally. Organic food isn’t more expensive because it’s trendy. It’s more expensive because that’s how much it costs to produce it, and organic farmers still mostly bear that cost themselves.”

In an age when we are more technologically connected yet more socially disconnected than ever before, the sustainable farming movement is uniting people over the dinner table. “People are craving connection and simplicity, and we are starting to eat more thoughtfully,” says Stuart Whitelaw, who sees SAGE establishing a demonstration agricultural or research college for sustainable food production. “The more you learn, the more you seek out different sorts of foods, and eventually, hopefully, you will find your way to a farmer.”

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