

Agrarian Adventure

From truffle lunches to two-day 'whole hog' days, The Agrarian Kitchen in Tasmania's Derwent Valley is a thriving farm and cooking school. As Susanne Kennedy writes, it began with a clear vision.



Multi-paned windows stretch from deep porcelain sink to church-high ceiling. The picture they frame, of apple trees, wandering geese and glimpses of the distant vegetable patch, fills the palatial country kitchen – a cook’s dream that blends modern conveniences with authentic rustic charm, and plenty of room for cartwheels should the impulse strike you. This window tableau, connecting farmhouse and garden, captures what Séverine Demanet and Rodney Dunn’s Tasmanian business, The Agrarian Kitchen, is all about: a sustainable farm-based cooking school, which turns on what the land yields and supports. As their website informs us: The agrarian system was subsistence farming where farmers grew a range of food crops and animals that complemented each other to provide food for their families and the local community... Our aim is to create a place where people can rediscover the simple pleasures of gathering and cooking with produce as close to its source as possible.

When the pair purchased their 1887 schoolhouse a few years ago it had an established cottage and small vegetable garden and a chook shed along with thirty heirloom fruit trees – apricot, apple, peach, pear – peppered around the property. As well as these established assets, the original classrooms were the perfect scale for kitchen and dining areas fit for a cooking school.

“Because we had worked on a business plan for the cooking school for two years,” recalls Séverine, “it was a case of finding the property to suit our vision, not the other way around, and this just had the right feel.”

Séverine and Rod had settled on the name and concept for their business early on and the pair’s very different skill-sets prepared them well for the new business venture. Rodney’s previous work lives were as apprentice chef to Tetsuya Wakuda and food editor for Australian Gourmet Traveller magazine; Séverine had worked as a Personal Assistant for Degremont in Sydney – an international water, wastewater and desalination company. Rodney’s skills were clearly suited to teaching and designing the seasonal classes and recipes that would be The Agrarian Kitchen’s selling point. Séverine’s background in book-keeping, tender writing and running an office were well applied to mapping and executing their dream successfully from a business perspective.

The school currently averages three classes per week and runs additional winter events including a truffle lunch for twenty-four following a traditional truffle hunt. The Whole Hog is a popular two-day class that shows students how to break down a pig to its cuts and turn them into dry cured bacon and sausage. “We cook and eat our way from nose to tail, which ends up being about fourteen dishes,” explains Rod.

The changing calendar of classes covers pastry, winter braising, tomatoes, lamb, sourdough baking and “cooking with fire”.

The pair moved to their Lachlan schoolhouse, in Tasmania’s Derwent Valley, in July 2007 and following a successful Tourism Tasmania Promotion Plan Grant application, officially opened the Agrarian → Kitchen with the State Minister for Tourism in November 2008.



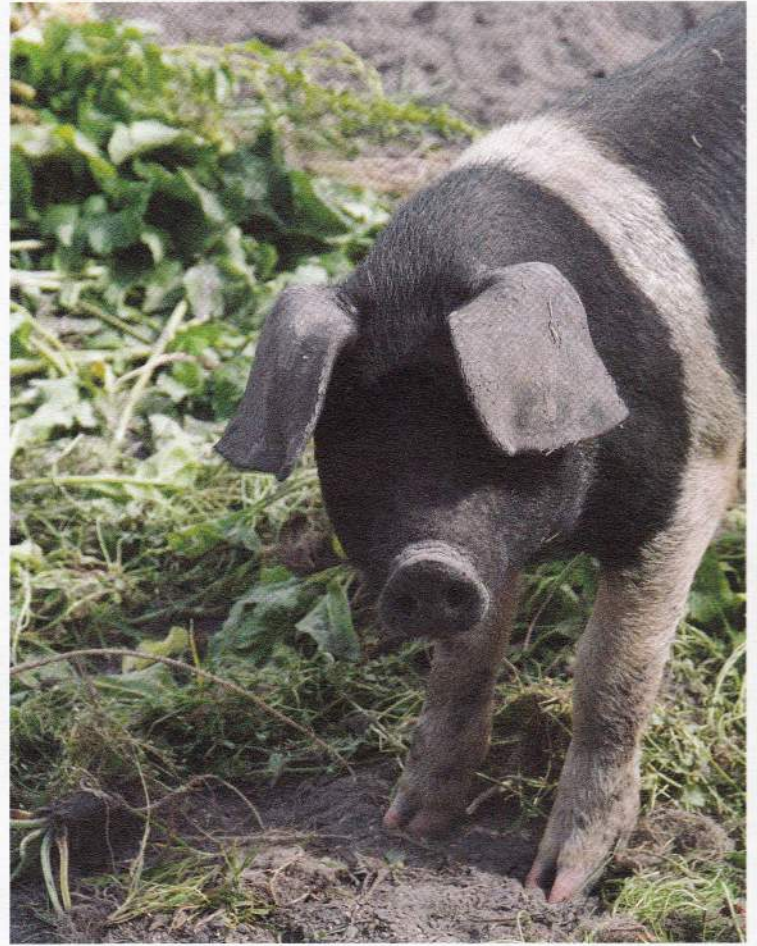


clockwise from top left: Still life in kitchen; just one of 60 heirloom varieties of tomato grown in the kitchen garden; cooking school preserves; Séverine returns with produce from the garden; A Dutch Barnevelder rooster prowls the yard (the hens of this breed produce spotted eggs); heirloom apples; Tristan lends a hand with his red wheelbarrow. **opposite page** Agrarian means 'of the land' and Rod and Séverine aim to produce everything in situ for their cooking classes; the immense kitchen is a cook's dream - 35 square metres of rustic charm and the latest modern conveniences. It also incorporates an Alan Scott designed wood-fired masonry oven.





left Salad greens. **right** The pigs do a great job of clearing the paddocks in preparation for the next growing season. **opposite** Rod beefing up the soil with rich compost and horse manure.



“The Tourism Tasmania Grant meant that we could get going so much faster,” says Séverine.

The grant was also about fostering collaboration between businesses so the pair refer their guests to nearby accommodation; promote their local business “partners” on their website; and source ingredients they don’t grow or breed from local farmers, fisherman, gardeners and artisan producers.

Fruit and vegetables are grown from heirloom seed without the use of chemicals or artificial fertilisers and they weed their garden manually. The pair also compost using the three bay system, with lots of horse manure added to the garden courtesy of their back fence neighbours. And while water comes from an easement to the Lachlan River, the couple are still mindful of what they use.

The original vegetable patch of raspberries, strawberries and asparagus has been expanded into a paddock, now the main source of food for Rod, Séverine, their small boy, Tristan, and the cooking school.

“We grow heirlooms because we think it’s important to rediscover the varieties that have been passed over with the streamlining of mass-production,” says Séverine. “We grow sixty varieties of tomatoes and in our Tomato Gluttony class guests get to pick and taste all the different types and appreciate their different colours and shapes. Then they bottle, preserve and prepare a range of dishes with them.”

There are many unfamiliar types/names of potatoes alongside thriving

dense vines of beans, snow peas and corn and, of all things, watermelon, just to name a few. Lachlan used to be known for its raspberries, and the pair plan to devote to berry canes a paddock currently being worked over by the small pigs.

And Rod and Séverine’s agrarian adventure goes beyond the production of fruit and vegetables to rare breeds of livestock which include Wessex saddleback pigs, Barnevelder chickens, and two British Alpine goats named Pretty Girl and Myrtle. The pair changed to goats after realising five acres was not enough space for their Jersey cows.

“The goats are the perfect size for us, and they produce heaps of milk for their size,” explains Rod. “Most people have pre-conceptions about milk that doesn’t come from a cow and I like to change people’s perceptions.” The watermelon is another case in point. Someone told Rod he couldn’t grow watermelons in Tasmania so he took this as a dare.

When the pair moved to Tasmania they were new to the worlds of horticulture and farming, but bravely threw themselves in at the deep end with the help of some expert coaching.

“In some ways big steps can be as much about naïveté as bravery,” explains Rod. “If you knew exactly what you were getting yourself into you might not do it!”

An early mentor, Paul Healy, a gardening columnist for the Hobart Mercury, helped set up their garden beds and instructed the pair not to use hardwood beams to separate them. This would keep the →



ground relatively flat for the pigs to roam more easily when let in at the end of a growing season.

“When we set the pigs to work,” says Séverine, “it takes them a couple of weeks to clear the big garden. They eat absolutely everything.” They now have gardening help one day a week from Rainer, who also works at the Botanical Gardens. Rainer has taught them to weed with a hoe so as to remove the weed heads but preserve the roots which store lots of nutrients.

The idiosyncrasies of their local environment are an ongoing discovery. “Things happen later here,” says Rod. “It is about five degrees warmer in summer and five degrees cooler in winter. That’s why berries are suited to the region – they need chill in the beginning and warmth later.”

The pair has clearly found pleasure in the rituals of the land: milking the goat, weeding the traditional way, tending the fires and going through the growing cycles. An added pleasure is sharing them with others.

“When you understand how much time it takes to grow and tend and water and protect food from the possums, you don’t want to waste any of it, and you see the students being more appreciative once they have



collected it themselves.

“I had never grown anything before we moved here; and Rod tried to grow herbs in Newtown (Sydney) but they just got dark spots on them and struggled with the pollution,” says Séverine. But now Séverine and Rod know from experience that anyone can learn to grow something.

“When we started, we thought if we could influence one person for the better then that would be reward enough,” says Séverine, “but we receive emails and letters all the time from guests who tell us they planted a herb or vegetable garden when they got home and what a difference it’s made to their lives.”

left The farm’s three bay composting system. **right** One of two British Alpine goats that provide milk for family and cooking school.

Info: Rod and Severine source their heirloom seeds from The Lost Seed (Tasmania), Diggers (Victoria) and Vilmaurin (France).