



Weekend Australian
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WEEKEND
A PLUS

* Croque Monsieur
Traditional french roasted
ham, cheese
Sauce

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WALKING THE WALK
The NSW town teaching city folk a lesson in paddock-to-plate eating



WALKING THE WALK

Mudgee, in NSW, leads a revolution in understanding where our food comes from

THE pig husbandry gags are starting to wear a bit thin — particularly among the husbands — but that's OK, because Alicia Sturrock is entranced by the pigs. Alicia, 5, from Sydney's inner west, is on the farm of Ormiston Free Range Pork in the foothills behind Mudgee, 3½ hours west of Sydney. Both Alicia and Mudgee are learning a thing or two about consumer fascination with the journey from paddock to plate.

Alicia and her dad, Geoff, represent two generations of a constant swarm of food fashionistas from the city who spend weekends in the pretty central tablelands town, satisfying their curiosity and pampering their palates.

"Alicia knows Jamie and Heston and Nigella as well as she knows Tom and Jerry and SpongeBob SquarePants," Geoff says. "But like most city kids she is a bit vague about the farm-to-fork bit. She knew that milk comes from cows, but she thought the cow had to be killed to get the milk out. So here we are, filling in a few of the gaps."

Back in the days before dining out replaced organised religion, food was something to be eaten. It was fuel, sustenance, nourishment. Now we talk about it, read about it, watch it incessantly on television, and emotionally engage with contestants on cooking shows. Our sustenance has become our mainstream entertainment.

Mudgee earned its place at the top table of foodie culture through the passion of Mudgee Fine Foods, a group formed five years ago to promote Mudgee as a culinary tourism destination, and its success has changed the perception of the word "lifestyle". Up-market media had

The message here is that life is doubly good when you think global and source local

hijacked lifestyle to describe an appetite for new material possessions. But the Mudgee definition is a pride in environmental awareness, in ethical artisan food production, and in a holistic approach to growing, marketing and presenting locavore food. The message here is that life is doubly good when you think global and source local.

Mudgee Fine Foods has developed and promoted a vibrant monthly farmers' market and a program of farm walks to teach a food-obsessed public more about what they are eating. The market is held on the third Saturday of each month, with guided walks of two stallholders'

properties the following day. (This month's market date is today and tomorrow's farm walks will offer an insight into the operations of Top Shed Olives and Ormiston Free Range Pork).

Farmers' market manager Liz Mayberry says the Mudgee market is effective in closing the most unfortunate gap in the food supply chain — the lack of communication between producer and consumer.

"Only a generation ago, every family had a relative who was on the land. But not any more," she says. That is why so many people have a curiosity about where their food comes from, and an ignorance about seasonal freshness. The interaction at the farmers' market and on the farm walks is satisfying for both parties.

The market scene confirms the diversity of the region's produce. Kylee Robinson is there with her Muscovy duck meat, which has won fave rave status at the exclusive Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort. Tim Woods is doing brisk business with his Wellington Farm lamb and Terry Rakis of Vrises Valley Organic Farm is offering a staggering array of rare vegetables and herbs. Today's special is stamnagathi, a type of chicory popular in his native Crete for its powerful antioxidant properties.

Terry is an evangelist for the benefits of his produce. "Eat good. Feel good," he tells a good-natured audience.

Most who promise to live by his creed then make a beeline for Mudgee Made Macarons, where Tanya Scott and Lara Hooper produce the world's most fashionable delicacy in such exotic flavours as peppermint, musk, jaffa, neapolitan and raffaello (almond and coconut). Macarons make them feel good, too.

Iain and Cath Stevenson of Top Shed Olives have table olives, olive oils, tapenades and pistachios, and Alan and Gloria Cox of Leaning Oak Winery and Dairy offer goat and sheep cheeses — a marinated goat fetta and a Baa Baa Blue — plus the right wines to accompany them.

There are organic wines, organic fruit and vegetables, artisan breads, honeys, figs, hazelnuts, jams. There's Angela Leonard, whose Angela's Edibles range of regional and seasonal preserves each year makes her the most successful exhibitor at the Mudgee Fine Food Awards — a nationally recognised event for artisan gourmet food producers. The range includes rhubarb jam, spiced pickled quinces and porty prunes. But challengers are on the horizon in the form of Linda Wilson's red hot sweet chilli relish with ginger and lime, Mowats of Mudgee's tapenades, The Grape Alternative's semillon and wild quince wine jelly, and the superior range of mus-



tards that appears under the label Luciano's A Bit on the Side. All are popular lines at the farmers' market.

Leaning Oak also participates in the farm walks, with pistachio and wine producer Cooyal Grove; wine, fig and saffron grower Di Lusso; Cudgegong Valley olives and olive oils; and Clearview Estate wines and orchard.

At Ormiston, James and Georgie Caspar embody the Mudgee Fine Foods policy of supporting meat producers and processors who consider the welfare of their animals from birth to death. James is a veterinary surgeon and the Ormiston venture is founded on the principles of compassion, quality and taste.

The Ormiston breeding sows, boars and piglets spend their lives roaming and grazing in the shady woodlands of the beautiful property. On their farm walks, James and Georgie explain farming methods and management, pig behaviour, and why free-range pigs are happier, healthier and, OK, more delicious.

Mudgee Fine Foods enjoys the support of the Mudgee Wine Grape Growers' Association and it's an accepted fact that in regions where wineries and cellar door tastings have flourished, so have the boutique food and accommodation sectors.

Grape Growers president Andrew Stein, promoting the distinctive regional personality and character of wines from more than 40 cellar doors, calls Mudgee "a great mix of country charm and urban chic".

Not a fine-dining town, Mudgee does however have lively cafe strips around Market and Church streets, both of which offer a profusion of small eateries with big atmosphere. The current hot spot is Market Street Cafe, yet another example of the fact that regionality and seasonality is the focus of everything that is exciting in Australia's contemporary foodscape.

Chef Aaron Cole first attracted attention to the purity and simplicity of his craft with a range of award-winning authentic sourdough breads. Now he has a rapport with a variety of local growers and farmers and uses the French provincial farmhouse as a model for Market Street Cafe's daily menus.

"What we gather during the day, we present for the evening meal," he says. "By respecting the produce and encouraging diversity, we're always going to present food with integrity and quality. Good food should always say something about where it's from."

Market Street Cafe is also the local retail outlet for Ormiston Free Range Pork. It's the mutual respect thing at work. The sense of working for — and benefiting from — a distinctive regional culinary community.

ROB INGRAM





CHECK IT OUT

Mudgee is a 3½-hour drive from Sydney or a 40-minute flight with Aeropelican.

- **The Mudgee Farmers' Market** is held on the third Saturday of each month in the grounds of St Mary's Catholic Church, corner of Market and Church streets. More: (02) 63726594 or email farmersmarket@mudgeefinefoods.com.au

- Guided farm walks (pictured) are conducted on the third Sunday of each month. Two walks of about an hour each are offered each time, with a coffee break in between. Depending on the season, there are opportunities to pick, collect and taste samples of the produce. Farm walk tickets can be purchased from the Mudgee Visitor Information



Centre, 84 Market St. Tickets are \$10 a person or \$20 a family and cover either or both farm walks. Walks start at 9.30am and 11.15pm.

- More: Mudgee Visitor Information Centre (02) 6372 1020 or visitmudgeeregion.com.au

Grower Terry Rakis at the farmers' market, top; Aaron Cole, owner of the Market Street Cafe, far left; and visitor Roy Capill, left, at the markets