

Sowing and Serving Change



Becoming first-generation farmers and breathing life back into a heritage pub was never going to be easy for one determined couple

BY *Cath Johnsen*

PHOTOS: VISITSUNSHINECOAST.COM

It's a gloriously sunny winter's day on Falls Farm, nestled in Queensland's bucolic Sunshine Coast hinterland, and I traipse across the undulating landscape, walking closely behind the farm's custodian, Jessica Huddart. We stroll through an orchard of yuzu citrus trees, and pass neat lines of cauliflower and kale that are bordered by basil and marigolds. Every living thing on the 16-hectare farm looks radiant.

Jessica Huddart, who runs Falls Farm with her husband, Ben Johnston, guides me over the red dirt of the market gardens, thick black gumboots on and a steaming cup of tea in hand, talking with obvious passion about the farm's philosophy.

"We originally bought the property as a weekend getaway," she says. "But when you have soil as rich as we have, you need to do something more with it." And so began a decade-long learning-curve of regenerative farming, which involves growing nutrient-dense food, focusing on soil health and avoiding interrupting the farm's natural ecosystem. Jessica and Ben, both tech designers in the web and digital design industry, bought the property sight unseen in 2013 while working in the US. It was only a 90-minute drive from their home in Brisbane, and

Left and top: Falls Farm is just down the road from Mapleton Public House, so whatever gets picked that morning goes on the restaurant menu



close to where Ben grew up. At the time, the farm had a non-native timber plantation and invasive lantana weed. Before even a single seed could be planted, the trees had to be bulldozed and weeds removed. To satisfy the couple's sustainability focus, the timber was woodchipped and used to lay pathways.

Softly spoken Jessica, a mother of three young children, is sometimes difficult to hear over the raucous cockatoos and insistent whipbird calls. Still, I marvel as she lists some of the more unusual vegetables the farm grows - from Buddha's hand citrus fruit and cranberry hibiscus, to Baby Blue Hopi popping corn (a miniature heirloom variety). Perhaps not produce that you'd find on the shelves at your local supermarket, but these vegetable varieties are sought after by chefs, who come from all around the region to purchase the Falls Farm's natural bounty.

Two years ago, with their farm thriving, Jessica and Ben bought



Above (from left): The pub has embraced its country heritage by serving local food and becoming a place where the community can connect

the 115-year-old local country pub in the township of Mapleton, just a ten-minute drive from their property. The purchase was the perfect opportunity to bring their paddock to plate dream a step closer.

Local chef Cameron Matthews, formerly of The Long Apron in nearby Montville, was one of the first chefs to use the Falls Farm produce in his kitchen. Serendipitously, Cameron had been looking for a restaurant to

call his own, and he agreed to join the team as the executive chef of the renamed Mapleton Public House. He would concentrate on the restaurant, while Jessica, taking on the role of publican, steered her energies towards transforming the pub into a place where community connection could be rekindled, because she believes, "one century of industrialised food has severed those bonds".

But the transition wasn't as neat and tidy as that last paragraph suggests. The pub had become neglected. Jessica, Ben and Cameron wanted the old pub to once again thrive.

The noisy, flashing pokie machines were the first to go as they seemed incongruent with the historic pub's well-trodden timber floorboards and panelled walls that have overheard many conversations over the past century. Gone too were the plates of cheap pub meals piled high with deep-fried frozen food. Instead, the menu features gourmet dishes like Falls Farm red kuri pumpkin and smoked labneh with spiced farm honey served in the fireplace-warmed dining room, or



PHOTOS: VISITSUNSHINECOAST.COM



Above, above right and bottom right: Jessica Huddard and executive chef Cameron Matthews share a 'sustainably connected land to plate' philosophy

outside on wraparound verandahs overlooking the Glasshouse Mountains and Blackall Range.

Opening the restaurant gave the new farmers the perfect platform to share their agricultural approach and give others the chance to taste the many common and lesser-known varieties of vegetables they were growing. "Really, it's a bit of an undercover mission to get people to eat more veggies," Jessica tells me. And a long list of veggies it is – from beet-root and purplette onions to kale and scallopini squash.

But as Cameron, Jessica and Ben worked hard to revive Mapleton Public House, some locals were a little sceptical. Cameron says the first six months at the helm of Mapleton Public House were the hardest of his extensive career.

"I've worked in fine-dining establishments where at the end of the service, you'd line up for a kick in the shins as your 'thank you' for the night," Cameron says. "But I'd rather go through that again than repeat the first six months here."

Cameron admits he didn't realise how resistant people could be to change, despite trying to temper the shift in approach by serving recognisable dishes. For example, instead of offering frozen calamari imported from Asia (a staple on the pub's previous menu), he served up locally caught squid with farm-fresh rocket and a house made tartare sauce.

"We received horrible reviews, even from people who hadn't eaten



PHOTOS: VISITSUNSHINECOAST.COM; (RESTAURANT INTERIOR) CATH JOHNSEN

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hot chips they were serving. "We scrapped a 40-item menu down to about 15 items," Jessica explains. "That was a shock for some people. And we changed the chips from those big fat beer battered ones to shoestring fries. That caused a lot of controversy!"

Cameron adds: "I decided on a seven-millimetre shoestring fry that I like because it still has the skin on and is minimally processed. Was it everyone's choice? No, but I made it mine!"

Jessica, Ben and Cameron can laugh about it now. Two years in, it's busy all week and weekends especially are humming with motorcycle groups who ride up the windy mountain from Brisbane, local families celebrating birthdays or anniversaries and music lovers gathered to hear local bands perform on a stage that Jessica's father built.

here under our new management," Cameron recalls, who received abuse over his menu. "It was brutal."

Staff shortages and a kitchen in need of renovation added to the stress. Cameron and his team of six initially managed with an inherited eight-burner stove that had only three working elements, no operational oven and an old pie warmer they found in a pile of ramshackle items to be thrown out.

On top of that, there was the most unexpected uproar over the type of

On other days you'll find book-worms meeting to hear from their favourite authors or swapping tomes in the pub's library corner, as well as holidaymakers who have discovered that there's more to the Sunshine Coast than long stretches of sandy beaches. You'll even catch some of the pub's original clientele seated on bar stools, surprising everyone by trying a boutique brew.

Meanwhile, the team are constantly brainstorming ideas to make the pub even better. Plans are underway for an overhaul of kitchen equipment.

Complaints have changed from “you’ve ruined our pub” to “I couldn’t get a car park because it was so popular”. And while Jessica jokes that her husband Ben has the biggest bar tab at the pub, she’s not just the publican, but also creative director, of both Falls Farm and Mapleton Public House.

“After my career in design, I wanted to do something that felt more real,” Jessica explains. “I see the digital experience and the farming and hospitality experience as quite similar in terms of design. You’re always thinking about the user and how they will navigate the whole experience: how does it look, feel, taste and smell.”

Her guiding principle for the pub is simple enough: will their guests feel like they’re coming to the farmhouse for a meal? “This means that you know where your food has come from, and you know it has been cooked with love,” Jessica says. “It means the people around the table are connected to each other, even if they are quite different, because families have a patchwork of people and personalities in them. Most of all, I want everyone who walks through those doors to feel welcome.”

Cameron agrees that food is more

than sustenance, that it’s a means of connecting with people and the land. His day often begins with an inspection of the produce at Falls Farm and crafting an ever-evolving menu to suit what’s in season to ensure minimal wastage.

“WE SIMPLY WANT TO CREATE A SPACE WHERE THERE IS WHOLESOME, AMAZING LOCAL FOOD, AND WHERE THE COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER”

Regenerating a 115-year-old business that’s been central to generations of a local community has been a huge task. But by drawing on the region’s rich farming heritage, Cameron, Jessica and Ben have ignited new life into a much-loved town monument. “We simply

want to create a space where there is wholesome, amazing local food, and where the community comes together to listen to bands and support smaller artists,” says Cameron. “If everything is broadacre and cookie cutter, we lose our sense of place, and we lose our culture.”

There’s no chance of that happening in this leafy country town. I find a seat on the pub’s deck overlooking towering Jacaranda and poinciana trees and tuck into plates of beautifully presented dishes like buttermilk Falls Farm carrots in a glaze of Buddha’s hand, with native pepper and pickled farm peppers. It’s not your average pub fare, but then again, this is not your average pub. **R**