

River Cottage Australia – back to Paradise

People find their way to a life connected to the land and to food through countless avenues. Some are born into it, others have a health scare that prompts a change in diet and lifestyle, while others dream of a simpler, more wholesome life as a way to escape the rat race. How I came to fall in love with tending the earth to produce the very best food can be traced back to a single moment, it was without a doubt, love at first taste.



By PAUL WEST
(PHOTOS COURTESY
FOXTEL/NICK WILSON)

Growing up in the Upper Hunter Valley I was surrounded by farmland. Graziers, vineyards and the odd market garden dotted the landscape that was left after the horse studs and mines fenced off their share. Despite this potentially fertile culture, food and farming were never high on my family's agenda. We lived and worked in the small community of Murrurundi and were a family that was very much of the meat and three veg with a roast on Sunday variety. It wasn't until I left home and started to travel Australia that my eyes were really opened to what food and farming could be.

Three months into an attempt to hitchhike around Australia, I found myself in Devonport, Northern Tasmania, strapped for cash and in desperate need of a home cooked meal. I was bemoaning this fact to anyone within earshot when a friendly backpacker suggested that I join the WWOOFing organisation. For those of you who don't know, WWOOF stands for Willing Workers on Organic Farms. The basic premise is that you go to a farm and work for four hours a day in exchange for food and accommodation. I leapt at the idea and joined up as fast as I could. Flicking through the farm guide, I came across a listing that I like the gist off, it was located in

the rather appropriately named locality of Upper Paradise and was run by an old French bloke by the name of Gilles. I called him up, he agreed to take me so I headed out to his place on the last of my cash. It was dark when I arrived so Gilles kindly fed me a light supper, showed me to my quarters and told me that he would collect me in the morning for breakfast. I had no idea that the next morning would change my life.

At 6am, Gilles came knocking on my door. As a 21 year old, I couldn't remember the last time that I had woken up that early, I thought maybe this WWOOFing gig was too good to be true. Gilles jovially told me that breakfast would be ready in 15 and asked if I could pick some fruit on my way up to the house. I mumbled something in reply, dressed against the autumn chill and headed out into the misty predawn. I walked across the dew soaked grass to where the apple trees stood, silhouetted against the golden light that heralded the sun's arrival. I pulled the base of my jumper up to my chest to form a makeshift basket and started stuffing it with every piece of fruit I could reach. After a couple of moments I realised that I had never eaten a piece of fruit straight from a tree before. I grabbed the biggest, reddest apple I could see and bit off a huge, juicy chunk. That was it, that

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one bite off an apple changed my perceptions of what food could be in a single instant. It was no longer something sterile, purchased from a fluorescent light soaked shelf, food was now something alive, tactile and better than anything that I had ever tasted before. The month on Gilles' farm that followed was full of similar experiences. The farms around where I grew up were mostly big grazing properties that ran beef or sheep and were run by cranky old blokes in dusty Landcruisers. In contrast, Gilles farm was like an agricultural Noah's ark. He had chickens, geese, ducks, pigs and cows, a huge veggie patch and the aforementioned orchard. I thought that farms like this only existed in kid's stories. The place was alive, every meal that we ate starred an ingredient that was either grown on the farm or by a friendly neighbour. As an impressionable young man, I thought that I had inadvertently stumbled across the meaning of life, I swore there and then that this was the type of life that I would try and live, and I've been true to that promise ever since.





In the years that followed I worked hard to equip myself with the necessary skill set to create my own slice of rural paradise. Though as someone who had an uncanny ability of killing plants and similar qualifications in the kitchen, I certainly had my work cut out for me. I worked in community gardens, I studied permaculture, I grew things in containers in my little backyard and eventually I took on a chefs apprenticeship (but that's a whole other story!) and after a couple of years I felt like I was making solid progress towards achieving my dream. My partner and I packed up our life where we were living in Newcastle and headed back to where

it all began, Tasmania. Without the capital to purchase a farm we settled instead for a deposit on a tiny two bedroom home on a 500 square meter block in a village about 30 minutes out of Hobart. I was working as a chef and growing everything that I could in my backyard. That's when I heard on the grapevine that there were plans in the works for an Australian version of River Cottage, and they were looking for someone to host it.

I was a huge fan of the original British series, the English host Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall was the first person in the media that I had seen articulate the dream that I held so closely. The show celebrated growing your own food, contributing to your local community and sharing good food with good company, it was right up my alley! Hugh was, and still is to this day a global megastar in the world of small farming, back to basics and simple, accessible cuisine. It was the world's respect and love for Hugh that nearly prevented me from applying. I thought that if, by some miracle I did win the role, then how could I possibly be mentioned in the same sentence as Hugh, let alone be the first person in the world to host River Cottage other than the man who created it. Realising that I was getting a bit ahead of myself, I lodged an 11th hour application, figuring that I had nothing to lose by applying. One thing led to another and then 3 months after first hearing about River cottage Australia, I answered a phone call that was very succinct, I was to be the host and I had three weeks to pack up and get to Central Tilba in New South Wales.

Fast forward three weeks and I'm standing in the kitchen of a beautiful old farmhouse, surrounded by 23 acres of fertile pasture with a sound engineer sticking a microphone to the inside of my shirt. A neurotic director is pacing around with a clipboard, rubbing his temples, informing me that Hugh FW is in a car at the bottom of the driveway and that he's going to drive up, get out, say "Hello, is anybody home?" and that's my cue to walk down the front steps



and met the man himself. Meeting an idol for the first time is awkward at the best of times, add a camera crew and it's hard to watch. After the dust settled on our first day of filming, I finally had a chance to talk to Hugh without our interactions being scrutinised and recorded. We talked food, farming and navigating the world of television. They say that you should never meet your heroes, fortunately for me I found the opposite to be true. Hugh is everything that you see on River Cottage and then some. He is witty, articulate and incredibly dedicated to furthering people's understanding of where food comes from and how it is prepared. Drawing on his 15 years of experience as a TV presenter, he mentored me on how to communicate my passions and beliefs to the camera in a way that was accessible and accurate. We spent a total of two weeks together while filming the

first season of River Cottage Australia and I feel incredibly fortunate to count Hugh not only as a mentor but as a friend.

I've been on the farm for a shade over two years now and it's been a non stop rollercoaster. I'm finally finding my feet as a small farmer, now tending a huge veggie patch, chickens, ducks, pigs, goats, a couple of heifers and even a little orchard. In a way, I've come full circle. Where once I stood on a farm in Paradise, being shown a better way of life, now I run a farm in a little slice of paradise and use it as a tool to help people understand where their food comes from and how to prepare simple, delicious meals. You could say that I've realised my dream, but that's the thing about dreams, the closer you get, the bigger they become. There's always more to know and learn and with two years on the farm down, I can't wait for the next 50.



➤ I am sure all our readers will be pleased to know that Paul will now be a regular contributor to Town & Country Farmer.

In future issues Paul will share more of his experiences at River Cottage Australia and also share some of his recipes.

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