



# The island advantage

*Fresh food, farmed sustainably and garnished with foraged edibles, is on the rise around Hobart, meeting demand for “Tassievore” spreads on local tables.*

Words KATE HENNESSY

Earth tumbles from the small, slim carrot that chef and farmer Rodney Dunn has just pulled from the ground. He rinses it and hands it over. It’s sweet and crisp; the best carrot I’ve had.

“Why did it taste so good?” I ask. “It’s eating it straight after it was picked,” Dunn says. “When carrots get stored, the green tops utilise the sugar in the root trying to stay alive. Day by day they deteriorate in flavour because the tops are on.”

We’re wandering The Agrarian Kitchen farm, half an hour from Hobart. In Sydney, Dunn was apprentice to

famous chef Tetsuya Wakuda; later he became food editor of *Australian Gourmet Traveller* magazine. The family left the mainland for rural Tasmania a decade ago to recreate the system of farming used before the Industrial Revolution. Guests spend a third of the day gathering in the garden, one-third cooking and one-third eating.

It is beautiful here — enough so that any one of these pastimes would be a joy. But letting people walk their own paddock-to-plate path is The Agrarian Kitchen’s vision.

“I wanted to create a food heaven and to grow as much food as possible without

chemicals,” says Dunn, “to harvest and cook food just out of the ground and teach people to cook fresh ingredients properly and see them blown away by the flavour.”

Tasmanians often frown at the broad beans on the menu, though. The beans grow heartily on the island and many grew up eating them. “Their mums boiled them until they were grey,” Dunn says. “I like to show how good they can be.”

Seed saving is one key to the farm’s success. “Plants regenerate via seeds so by taking seeds you’re retaking the power. It’s best to save your own seed because plants are incredibly smart and they evolve to your garden.” Dunn grows



*Clockwise from far left: Picking produce out the front of chef and farmer Rodney Dunn's food heaven, The Agrarian Kitchen; Dunn on the farm with some edible goodies; a rooster goes freeranging; it's tucker time for these chooks; in the kitchen, where guests of The Agrarian Kitchen spend a third of their day. Below: Geese taking a gander around The Agrarian Kitchen.*



heirloom varieties only, as well as old plants such as Alpine strawberries (they taste like bubble gum and candy).

In the hills close by is an "old guy" who breeds potatoes with pink and purple flesh. By the time this is revealed, Dunn has explained a lot to me: predator plants, soil health and the difference between a porker and a prosciutto pig. So when I ask why The Agrarian Kitchen grows coloured potatoes I don't expect him to say, "Because they're cool."

But I'm glad he does. It expresses the enthusiasm and lack of pretension that typifies all of my interactions with Tasmanian growers.

### **Growth of the small producer**

According to not-for profit organisation Sprout Tasmania, the number of small-scale producers in this southernmost state is growing.

"People are making farm changes rather than sea changes," says the group's co-founder Alice Percy. "Consumers want to know where their food comes from and meet the

producers. And we have an island advantage of being able to buy super-fresh produce, picked that morning."

Hobart's Hill Street Grocer, for example, is a gourmet supermarket chain that stocks "locavore" boxes with 80 per cent of its produce sourced in Tasmania.

Percy tells me she's just back from a ride in the Meehan Ranges on the river shore. Doorstop nature is the upside of winters that are long and cold. It's a city of ominous clouds one moment and iridescent rainbows the next, yet every Hobart hill has a view of either Mt Wellington above or the River Derwent below.

While proximity to wilderness has traditionally been Hobart's drawcard, since the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) opened in 2011, cultural tourism has spiked. Locals are treated to two international arts festivals each year: Mona Foma in summer and Dark Mofo in winter. The latter offers an extravaganza of food and drink called The Winter Feast, a firelit bacchanalian sight to behold — and taste.

"Dark Mofo is the busiest fortnight of the year," says farmer Richard Weston. Weston Farms specialises in olive oil and peonies, though Richard and his wife Belinda describe their kitchen as a "laboratory" based on one premise: don't waste food.

A year ago they experimented with the side buds of their peonies. "We fermented and pickled them, making a beautiful caper," says Richard. "The taste is like a fresh green pea."

Happily, visitors to Hobart can sample the Westons' epicurean experiments at The Pigeon Hole cafe in West Hobart, an outlet for the farm's produce. When I go for lunch, my order has run out but the waitress is unfazed. She speaks over her shoulder to the chef and, together, they breezily customise a replacement. Clearly, everyone here is hands-on with food.

The cafe's chefs visit his farm regularly, Weston says. "It gives them a true understanding of seasonality. Things don't stay stagnant and they see that. The other benefit is they look at



**Clockwise from left:** It's time to pick garlic at Hobart City Farm; celebrating a bumper cucumber crop at Hobart City Farm; out harvesting saffron milk cap mushies with Wild Artisan's Tristan Stephens; (good) booze with a view at McHenry Distillery; foraging for two Tassie treats: grey salt bush and samphire.



something growing and realise how they want to serve it."

The Westons' commitment to reusing organic waste has sparked some terrific ideas. When \$500 worth of coffee slipped out of date, they made a meat rub with smoked paprika, salt, brown sugar, garlic and cumin. It was a hit. "Butchers come in for it all the time."

Their reputation for ingenious food salvaging precedes them, too. When we talk, Weston is just back from a meeting with a local winemaker. "She had a Pinot that oxidised, so we're going to turn it into red-wine vinegar. It's better than throwing 400 litres of wine away."

### **A most important job**

Up the hill in New Town is a half-acre plot that, until 2015, was unused grassland. Volunteers have since transformed it into an abundant urban farm. "In a time when farmers are literally walking off their land ... we're walking back onto vacant land and re-embracing one of the world's most important jobs," says the Hobart City Farm website.

Volunteer Bridget Stewart shows me around. She worked at an organic farm run by the Hobart store Goulds Natural Medicine and grew more inspired by the

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day. "I learnt how to use a big scythe to cut peppermint," she says. "It sounds old-fashioned but it was so efficient."

"The common understanding is that small-scale and hand-powered is slow and low output. People think you need tractors and fuel-powered machines but you can grow a lot of food in a small space with a good system, planning and well-designed hand tools." As an example she shows me a tilter, a drill-powered machine that tills the soil.

We snack on red and yellow cherry tomatoes, warm from the vine. The farm is bursting with beetroot, beans, snow peas and rhubarb. Where possible, seeds are sourced nearby because local breeds suit local conditions. And Tasmania's conditions are certainly unique. The strong sun prickles your skin. It's summer as I write this but a cold wind whips our words away, so we retreat to the farm's HQ.

I pick my way there between pots, gardening tools and bags of seaweed pellets. It's a hive of happy activity now but this part of Hobart has a sad history.

Known as St John's Park Precinct, in the 1800s it was dominated by institutions for "Tasmanians in need" including two convict-built schools for orphans.

The stolen generation began early in Tasmania with several Aboriginal children taken from their Flinders Island families and brought to the orphanage — among them William Lanne, or King Billy, known as the last full-blooded Aboriginal Tasmanian man. Later, war veterans and people with mental illness and dementia were sent here, too.

Hobart City Farm hosts community events and training for aspiring yet unemployed farmers. Located on land with such a painful past, the farm's focus beyond food and towards social inclusion is a good way to begin to heal old wounds.

### **Foraging up a feast**

However, not all of Hobart's fresh food comes from farms. Some grows wild, weedy and free.

Imagine entering a pine forest at dawn. You're there early to beat other



foragers but mainly to find your haul of pine mushrooms before the sun does. It's cold and still. You wonder, "Did I get out of my warm bed for no reason?" A few hours later, you're returning to Hobart with eight kilos of saffron milk caps and slippery jacks in the backseat.

"The elation is amazing," says cook and forager Mic Giuliani. He's been foraging since his granddad — from Italy — taught him as a kid. Giuliani owns Sirocco South, a business that uses Tasmanian ingredients to make Italian slow food. The mushrooms he gathers in the radiata pine forests are vitamin D bombs, an excellent supplement for locals who grow deficient during winter.

Tristan Stephens of Wild Artisan is another foraging chef. Foraging, he says, can be harvesting wild or introduced plants, weeds or natives. "Essentially, it's going into a plant's environment and harvesting there." Half the joy is roaming the places where edibles grow: river edges, pine forests, fields, beaches and estuaries.

Foraged food is hardy, needs no fertiliser and lives in poor soil. "It's foodstuff for hard times," says Stephens. The plants he gathers have wonderful names: wild salsify, brassica, bittercress, grey saltbush, sassafras, yarrow,

samphire. But don't pick the wrong plant. Foxglove will slow your heart down, hemlock will give you paralysis and the death cap mushroom can be fatal.

Stephens says foraging opens people up. "We disassociate edibility with wild plants. Foraging makes people more observant of what's around them." 🍄

## 5 of Hobart's best

### Where to stay

#### ➤ Mona Pavilions

These eight pavilions at MONA are defined by contemporary design and avant-garde art. A heated pool, sauna, winery and a museum tour should cap things off nicely. [mona.net.au/stay/mona-pavilions](http://mona.net.au/stay/mona-pavilions)

#### ➤ MACq 01

This premium hotel on Hobart's waterfront is dedicated to storytelling. The characters and tales that shaped Van Diemen's Land are shared in a setting of informal luxury. [macq01.com.au](http://macq01.com.au)

#### ➤ Satellite Island

Satellite Island is your own private island of untamed wilderness in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. Fish from the jetty or shuck oysters off a rock shelf. [satelliteisland.com.au](http://satelliteisland.com.au)

#### ➤ Stone Flower Barn

This mid-1800s barn is now a luxurious, light-filled accommodation. Fully equipped, self-contained and minutes from downtown Hobart. [stayz.com.au/accommodation/tas/southern-tasmania/hobart/168893](http://stayz.com.au/accommodation/tas/southern-tasmania/hobart/168893)

#### ➤ Woodbridge Hill Hideaway

Made from salvaged Tasmanian timber, these hidden cabins have great views. Heated bathroom floors, a spa and a wood fire make for a cosy winter retreat. [woodbridgehillhideaway.com.au](http://woodbridgehillhideaway.com.au)

### Where to eat

#### ➤ Quartermaster's Arms

In fashionable North Hobart is this casual bar and "Tassievore" eatery. Its ethical approach to an almost exclusively Tasmanian menu can be washed down by a local craft beer. [tasmanquartermasters.com.au](http://tasmanquartermasters.com.au)

#### ➤ Mures

This seafood institution on the Hobart waterfront has a stunning view from its à la carte Upper Deck restaurant. Mures is a family-owned business that uses sustainable fishing techniques and its own boat. The wine list is exclusively Tasmanian

and the oysters are the best you'll get. [mures.com.au/upper-deck](http://mures.com.au/upper-deck)

#### ➤ Etties

A European-inspired wine bar and one of Hobart's oldest digs, Etties pairs simple dishes with old- and new-world wines and prides itself on premium ingredients and knowing its growers. [etties.com.au](http://etties.com.au)

#### ➤ Dier Makr

This intimate CBD bistro and wine bar does everything from creative cocktails to bar snacks and tasting menu. Local, seasonal ingredients are a focus as are wines made with no synthetic chemicals from organic or biodynamic vineyards. [diermakr.com](http://diermakr.com)

#### ➤ Templo

The tiny, tucked-away restaurant specialises in shared plates and unique wines. Italian flavours are served up from an all-day menu so, if you can't do dinner, try lunch. [templo.com.au](http://templo.com.au)

### Where to indulge

#### ➤ Savoy Day Spa

This traditional spa in the CBD uses Aveda products and is a go-to for locals. [savoydayspa.com.au](http://savoydayspa.com.au)

#### ➤ Hidden Cove

Find personalised treatment at this South Hobart spa on an acreage overlooking the River Derwent. [hiddencovedayspa.com.au](http://hiddencovedayspa.com.au)

#### ➤ Bruny Island day trip

Cruise by towering sea cliffs, walk out to mystical rock arches and picnic on local cheese and oysters by Cape Bruny Lighthouse. [brunyislandtraveller.com.au](http://brunyislandtraveller.com.au)

#### ➤ DIY gin

At Bill McHenry's Distillery, you use water from an onsite spring blended with Tasmanian botanicals to make your ideal gin. An outdoor lunch in the hills completes this big day out. [bespoketasmania.com/gin-workshops-1](http://bespoketasmania.com/gin-workshops-1)

#### ➤ Do a whisky tour

If you think winter and whisky go hand in hand, this cosy tour is for you — especially when you sip by an open fire. [drinktasmania.com.au/project/whisky-tours](http://drinktasmania.com.au/project/whisky-tours)

*Kate Hennessy's arts and travel writing has taken her to Africa, Papua New Guinea, Taiwan, Turkey, the Solomon Islands, Peru and top-end Aboriginal communities. She is published in The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald and many more and guests on ABC TV as well as at writers' festivals and panels. W: [thesmallestroom.com.au](http://thesmallestroom.com.au)*