



# THE AGE OF AGRARIANS

An old Derwent Valley school house is not only dishing out knowledge – it’s dishing it up. Story and photos: Susan Gough Henly.



Locavores strive to eat food grown within a 100-mile radius, but the Agrarian Kitchen gets even closer to home by creating a hands-on, farm-based cooking school where many ingredients are found just outside the kitchen door.

The brainchild of Rodney Dunn, who trained at Tetsuya’s in Sydney and was food editor of *Australian Gourmet Traveller*, The Agrarian Kitchen teaches guests how to reconnect cooking in the kitchen with growing their own produce on the land. Fittingly, it’s housed in an old schoolhouse, a 19th century weatherboard building surrounded by edible gardens in the Derwent Valley, a scenic 45-minute drive from Hobart.

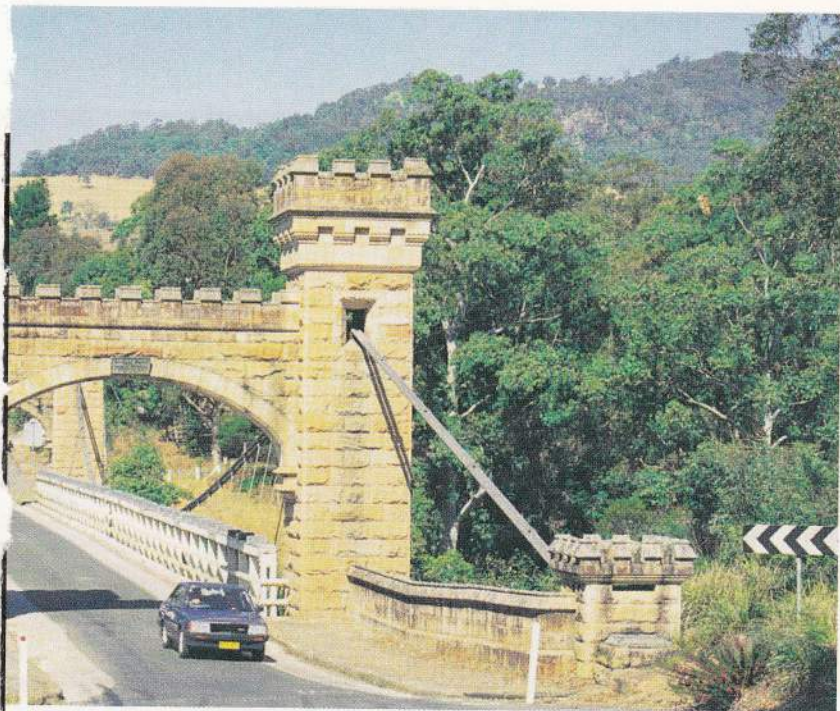
The old is new again at this little patch of paradise, where Rodney and

his wife Severine and son Tristan moved in 2007. Sustainable farming practices are at the core of their philosophy, with the farm recreating the agrarian system that pre-dated the industrial revolution.

The overriding focus is to show people how to cook with natural seasonal foods that are bursting with flavour.

A bevy of heirloom vegetables are grown organically without the use of chemicals or artificial fertilisers. There is also a huge berry patch with raspberries, brambleberries, gooseberries and currants, plus a 37-tree orchard of heritage apples, pears, plums, cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, quinces and mulberries.

A big fan of rare-breed animals, Rodney has Barnevelder chickens,



LEFT | The village green atmosphere of Bradman Oval in Bowral.

ABOVE | The Hampden Suspension Bridge in Kangaroo Valley.

GETTY IMAGES, TOURISM NSW

Kangaroo Valley is at the bottom of the steep but rewarding road on the way to the coast, and its landmark is the 1898 sandstone Hampden Bridge. This is a true valley – the hills all around squeeze the village into basically just either side of the main street. It makes the place feel snug.

The region's other hero village, Berrima, is more touristy, but that's because it's dripping with history, charm and convict era architecture. Like so much else in this region, it can't help being gorgeous ■

## MORE

All the attractions and drives in this feature can be found at [www.southern-highlands.com.au](http://www.southern-highlands.com.au). Also visit [www.internationalcrickethall.com](http://www.internationalcrickethall.com). Peppers Craigburn has a package that includes accommodation and the Cricket Hall of Fame – go to [www.peppers.com.au](http://www.peppers.com.au) or call 02 4862 8000 for details.

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which produce dark brown eggs with chocolate spots, Embden and Chinese cross-breed geese, British alpine milking goats and Wessex saddleback pigs. He is also a strong supporter of local farmers and foragers who supply wild mushrooms, wagyu beef, black truffles, rock lobster, abalone, lamb and wild trout.

A maximum of eight people enjoy each day-long class. First, everyone dons gumboots to collect eggs, pick fruit and vegetables, and even learn how to milk goats. Then it is all hands on deck in the kitchen to prepare a feast of six dishes, which are enjoyed over lunch with Tasmanian wines and artisanal ales. Even the plates are made by a local potter.

The spacious professional kitchen is located in a former classroom with large casement windows overlooking the 2ha property, shaded by trees which school-children planted at Federation. The blackboard is now used to feature the day's menu. The centrepiece is the Alan Scott-designed woodfired masonry oven, a favourite of artisan bakers to make naturally fermented bread. A large stainless steel work bench gives plenty of room for everyone to work collabora-

tively as they share the tasks of each recipe while tasting the samples.

Dishes could be heirloom tomato soup with basil pesto; potato gnocchi with nettles and asparagus; pancetta, ricotta and silverbeet rotolo; garlic marinated chicken cooked in cider; poached wagyu beef brisket with coriander and horseradish relish; for dessert, it could be rhubarb mille-feuille with rhubarb sorbet and quince frangipane tartlets with goat's milk ice-cream.

Rodney provides calm and thoughtful guidance every step of the way and he peppers his instructions with practical tips that are useful for beginners and experienced cooks alike. It is a convivial, chatty and relaxed atmosphere.

Classes are in three formats, with the Agrarian Experience the most popular. The Little Agrarian is a paddock-to-plate adventure for children, while Agrarian Master Classes focus on artisanal topics such as secrets of sourdough, charcuterie, handmade pasta, preserving summer's bounty, pastry 101, and desserts to die for. Classes are taught by Rodney and other experts, including a butcher, a baker and a pastry maker.



## MORE

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[www.theagrariankitchen.com](http://www.theagrariankitchen.com).

OPPOSITE PAGE | Collecting vegetables in the kitchen garden (top) and dining on their morning's work (bottom).

LEFT | Rodney Dunn (centre) taking a class.

ABOVE | Good gumboots are an essential part of the Agrarian Kitchen process (top) ... Rodney serves up some advice (centre) ... Rodney's rotolo filling (bottom).