



keeping it local

For high-quality produce and music, the tiny town of **Nundle** punches well above its weight. By Megan Trousdale

While Nundle doesn't have a Michelin star-rated chef or a hatted restaurant, it has a strong, homespun food culture that comes from growing food, exchanging excess produce and sharing recipes.

This culture largely stems from necessity. Nundle is a town of 300 people, 60km from the nearest supermarket or grocer at Tamworth or Quirindi in northern inland NSW, and growing your own creates a convenient source of fresh food. Even the local Nundle Public School has a thriving vegetable garden.

A supportive figure in this DIY food culture is singer/songwriter Toni Swain, who cannot bear to see produce go to waste and regularly turns a glut of whatever is going into preserves, conserves and condiments.

Toni and partner, musician and shearer, Jeff Gibson, moved to Nundle seven years ago after meeting at the Tamworth Country Music Festival and getting a taste for life with a bit of land at Bendemeer, north of Tamworth.

Their two acres on the Peel River at Nundle is a hive of productivity, whether it is songwriting for Toni's latest album, *The Red Shed*, hosting their biennial homegrown music festival *Gibbostock*, egg production by their 10 chickens and two ducks, raising pigs for homemade salami, prosciutto and pork, growing vegetables in their large plot, or harvesting apples, plums and figs from 20-year-old trees.

They have added lime, lemon, quince, olive, nectarine, pear and nashi to the orchard, have a nanny goat in kid with plans to produce goat milk, and planted walnuts, hazlenuts, and truffles with an eye on the future.

Added into the mix are their sons Quinn, 8, and Digby, 4, who free-range in the garden and are willing helpers with projects.

Toni sells food under the label Picket Fence Produce at the weekend Nundle Craft Inc where her Brinjal Pickle, Green Tomato Chutney and

Hot Lime Pickle spice up the shelves.

"I sold my first pickles at North Annandale markets in Sydney 20 years ago," Toni says. "I've always liked Indian cooking, and Indian food and pickles go hand-in-hand. I was cooking Indian for fellow musicians and started making my own accompaniments. They are so much nicer than the commercial lines. The ultimate compliment came from an Indian/Australian man at a recent market who said, 'This is very good pickle'."

Toni organises regular three-course dinner and live music evenings at The Supper Room of the Nundle Memorial Hall, catering for up to 60 guests.

Food themes have spanned Cajun, Thai, Indian and Moroccan and musicians Melanie Horsnell, Blake Saban, "Big Daddy" Roy Payne and Jimmy Dowling have played at the intimate venue.

For the past two years the same venue has served as a Picket Fence Produce pop-up café during the Nundle CWA Art Exhibition in November, and tapas and live music by The Junes for Nundle Rocks, an alternative country fringe festival during the Tamworth Country Music Festival in January.

In March, Toni worked with a small committee of volunteers and members of the Nundle and District Lions Club to feed 270 guests at the annual Nundle Country Picnic, developing a menu featuring local produce heroes Arc-en-ciel Trout Farm at Hanging Rock and Peel Valley Milk, olives, seeded crisp breads, herbed labneh, yabbies and blackberries.

This year Toni has spread her foodie wings to become part of the larger annual 10-day Taste Tamworth Festival in April, spotlighting producers from the Upper Hunter, New England, Liverpool Plains and Peel Valley. The Festival is built on four signature events, the Pop-up Laneway Bar, Taste in the Park, Long Lunch, and Farm Gate Trail, involving 20 farms and producers within a two-hour or 100 mile food radius of Tamworth.

The Festival is so well supported, attracting 7,000 people to Taste in the Park, that organisers are looking to offer the Farm Gate Trail to visitors year-round. This will take in destinations as diverse as Koolkuna Berries, Arc-en-ciel Trout Farm, Nundle Craft Inc, Peel Valley Milk, Bacco's Bakery, Hunter Belle Cheese, The Conscious Farmer Grassfed Beef, Myall Springs Organic Beef and Lamb, The Yabby Guys, Le Pruneau Weekly Organic Market, Barraba Artisans' and Farmers' Market, New England Brewing Company, Greenhill Orchards, Eastview Estate winery, brewery, distillery and restaurant, Sunhill Dairy Goats, Paradise Fresh hydroponic lettuce, Australian Bush Honey, Quast Turkeys, Kitty Crawford Estate and Banalasta Blickling Estate.

Back at Toni's cosy, tongue-and-groove, timber-lined kitchen at Nundle, the Rayburn wood stove is firing and laksa is brewing on the stovetop. Toni is about to prep for her Picket Fence Produce stall at Sustainable Namoi Expo at Tamworth, followed by catering for a pre-wedding party.

Her expo menu takes on a winter tone based on close Italian friends the Rindo family's Umindo Chicken with polenta, slow-braised chicken in red wine, rosemary and tomato, served with polenta wedges.

She has just returned from cooking for musicians and visitors at the Karuah Bluegrass Festival in the Hunter Valley and is heartened by comments she received.

"One woman asked, 'Your food is so lovely, what do you put in it?' and I said 'Time. Good food takes time'. Her response was 'I can taste it'." Keep an eye on what Toni Swain has planned, including an upcoming music tour in late June/early July to Canberra, Melbourne, Gippsland, Vic and South Coast, NSW, at www.toniswain.com and www.nundle.com.au, and join Taste Tamworth on Facebook, Twitter and www.tastetamworth.com.au.