

Mavis's kitchen

HOW A SRI LANKAN MUM INSPIRED A SLOW-FOOD REVOLUTION IN THE TWEED VALLEY, NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES.

STORY + PHOTOS **SHERIDAN ROGERS**

WHEN CHARLIE EBELL and Peter Clarke moved their award-winning restaurant from the Gold Coast, Queensland, to the lush Tweed Valley in northern NSW a few years ago, little did they realise how popular their slow-food approach would become.

Nestled at the base of Mt Warning near Uki, 10 minutes from Murwillumbah, the old Harley Street Brasserie was reborn as Mavis's Kitchen & Cabins, where fresh organic produce harvested from the kitchen garden now reign supreme.

While many of their old customers from the Harley Street days regularly take the one-hour drive to the Tweed Valley for lunch, dinner or a weekend, Charlie and Peter have found a new coterie of fans among the laid-back locals.

In keeping with the tree-change philosophy, the restaurant underwent a mid-life transformation, and is now a simple, country-style dining experience where you feel like you're sitting at a table in the kitchen of Charlie's mum, Mavis. Charlie earned his culinary stripes at Melbourne's famous French Lettuce Patisserie and Bakery, but his passion for food comes straight from his mum. She was born in Sri Lanka and her cooking skills are legendary, Charlie says. "At 94 years of age, she'll still take over our commercial kitchen and whip up a five-course meal for 10 people when she comes up to visit."

Having "been there, done that" with fine-dining cuisine, Peter and Charlie opted for a simple, slow-food approach built around fresh, seasonal, locally grown produce. There's no printed menu. Instead, every morning, Charlie and his chefs create the day's

selections based on what's ready to be harvested from the garden. You could find yourself tucking into a beautifully simple platter of ham off the bone, creamy egg and potato salad, and halved roma tomatoes with crimson wedges of homegrown beetroot. Or it might be a tasty spinach and feta pie. Or perhaps baby carrots, spring onions and goat's cheese have been artfully arranged on a crispy pizza base, scattered with fresh rocket and a splash of balsamic dressing.

Wherever possible, they use organic produce, much of which is grown in their own biodynamic kitchen garden, or freshly harvested from the rich volcanic soils of the Tweed Valley. They use locally grown Carool coffee and Madura Tea, Northern Rivers Olive Oil and olives, Tweed Valley cheeses (fetta, ricotta, brie, haloumi) and fresh goat meat from a property at Roberts Bridges. The kitchen also has a range of organic wines available (including Rosnay, Tamburlaine, Richmond Plains and Thistle Hill), some by the glass. "Mavis's Kitchen is about giving people a connection to where their food comes from," Charlie says. "It's about connecting back to the earth, to our planet, to nature. We want people to come here and to relax."

Perfectly positioned against the ever-changing colours of Mt Warning, Mavis's Kitchen looks out across green pastures and a babbling stream. Chooks peck at the grass. Ducks swim serenely on the dam. "The garden keeps me sane," Charlie says.

The historic building was once a family home built on the Gold Coast by the Loder family in the early 1900s. It was ▶



The scrumptious spinach and feta pie may or may not be on the menu, depending on what is freshly available or growing in the garden. **ABOVE:** Charlie Ebell in the organic garden. **OPPOSITE:** The building was moved from the Broadwater on the Gold Coast to this location in the Tweed Valley.



DINING

The adults-only log cabin is one of three accommodation options on the property and includes a full kitchen.

BRAISED ROBERTS BRIDGE KID WITH HARICOT BEANS

Serves 4

2 small legs of young kid, bone in
Salt and pepper, to taste
Plain flour, for dusting
Olive oil, for frying
1 large brown onion, diced
2 cloves garlic, smashed
4 stalks celery, sliced finely
2 large carrots, peeled and diced
Generous amount of fresh thyme
½ bunch fresh tarragon
2 bay leaves
2 tablespoons cracked white peppercorns
400ml white balsamic vinegar
250ml white wine
1 cup cooked haricot beans
1 cup cooked cannellini beans
2 litres light stock (chicken, vegetable or veal)
4 large potatoes, peeled, diced and par-cooked

Preheat oven to slow (150–160°C).

Dust the kid in well-season flour, shaking off excess.

In a heavy-based pan, seal kid in olive oil until golden all over.

Remove and set aside. Add onions, garlic, celery and carrots to pan and fry over medium heat until lightly coloured.

Return the kid back to the pan along with the fresh herbs and peppercorns. Deglaze the pan with the balsamic vinegar and reduce by one third. Add the white wine and stock along with the beans and bring to the boil.

Cover with foil (or with a tight-fitting lid) and cook for 2½ hours. Add par-cooked potatoes and adjust seasoning, including adding extra herbs and vinegar if needed. Cook a further 2 hours or until kid meat falls from bones.

Serve with crusty bread, steamed garden vegetables or side salad and drizzled with a little extra virgin olive oil.

originally surrounded by a lush dairy farm, stretching down to the shores of the Broadwater. When the property was sold to developers in 2006, Peter and Charlie moved the house – lock, stock and barrel – to their 10-hectare retreat in the Tweed Valley.

The bulging herb and vegetable garden was designed by the region's finest garden designers and sculptors, Lana Tyacke and Rob Cottrell. It is set out in a double-shamrock pattern and boasts a wide range of greens including chervil, mint, mustard greens, cos and oakleaf lettuces, radicchio and parsley. They grow in deep, organic soil that is contained by upright terracotta tiles up to about knee-height. Lush citrus trees such as ruby grapefruit, cumquats and oranges stud the centre.

Accommodation on the property includes a charming log cabin, an old dairy and a stunning three-bedroom Balinese-style house, perfect for families or groups of up to eight people. Peter and Charlie used to live here and their excellent taste is apparent throughout the house. Its large outdoor verandah (wired for music) and extensive modern kitchen (which includes a spacious refrigerator and coffee maker) make it perfect for weekend entertaining. The fridge is stocked with all you need for breakfast – fresh eggs, bacon, milk, orange juice, fresh coffee and bread.

The old dairy has been converted into a self-contained cabin that combines rustic charm with modern country-style décor. The creamery now serves as a romantic bedroom, the lounge area has sofa beds to accommodate an extra couple, and you can whip up brekky the next morning in the galley kitchen.

Past the dam, an old log cabin built back in the '70s by a local Vietnam vet – Mad Mick – provides additional accommodation in an equally comfy setting, with the bonus of a long verandah which would be perfect for sunset drinks or morning coffee.

Mobile phone coverage is mercifully intermittent, which means you can really drop out for a day or two.

MAVIS'S KITCHEN & CABINS @ MT WARNING

64 Mt Warning Road, Uki, 2484

Phone: (02) 6679 5664 Email: home@maviseskitchen.com.au

Open for lunch Wednesday to Sunday; and for dinner on Friday and Saturday night.

www.maviseskitchen.com.au