

Happy schnapps

BRAD AND MONIKA SPALDING HAVE MELDED THEIR AUSTRALIAN AND AUSTRIAN HERITAGES TO PRODUCE A STUNNING SCHNAPPS DISTILLERY – AND TWO RESTAURANTS – IN THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS.

BY SHERIDAN ROGERS



Brad Spalding and his wife Monika at the schnapps distillery and Austrian-style restaurant they run in the the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales.
OPPOSITE: The imported still at Wild Brumby Schnapps turns fermented fruit pulp into crisp, clean schnapps.

THE STARK, boulder-strewn country of the Alpine Way in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales is not a place you'd expect to find a little bit of Austria. Yet just 11 kilometres out of Jindabyne, a town well known to skiers en route to the ski fields, former ski-instructor Brad Spalding and his Austrian wife, Monika, have built a stunning schnapps distillery and restaurant surrounded by a sculpture park.

As soon as you drive through the gates onto the property, you become aware of a unique sense of style, which successfully marries Aussie and Austrian influences. Brad's training in art and design at La Trobe University has clearly been an influence, as has the work of world-famous Austrian sculptor Andreas Buisman who was artist-in-residence on the property for a year. Buisman's polished granite boulders are a knockout, as are the rusty sculpture balls and many of the other works of art that are cleverly placed in situ around the distillery and homestead. The path leading to the distillery is studded with stylish rusty-looking outdoor lights, and not far from the front door is a magnificent bronze life-size brumby.

The property was originally a riding school and Brad has cleverly converted the former saddlery into a casual eatery with a gleaming large copper still in the middle of the room. It's here that people gather to taste his schnapps made with fruit sourced from their adjacent organic raspberry farm and from local producers in the Tumut, Batlow and Snowy Mountains region.

While the fruit is all-Australian, the techniques for making Wild Brumby Schnapps are Austrian, passed down by Stephan Hagleitner, Monika's grandfather, who was distilling schnapps in the farmyards around the Austrian village of Kitzbühel long before Brad and Monika were born. The distilling of schnapps is steeped in centuries of tradition and it was the joining of the two families that was the genesis of Brad's Australian schnapps production.

"The Europeans hold their cards close to their chest when it comes to the art of distillation," Brad says. "After years of working as an instructor on the ski fields of the Alps in

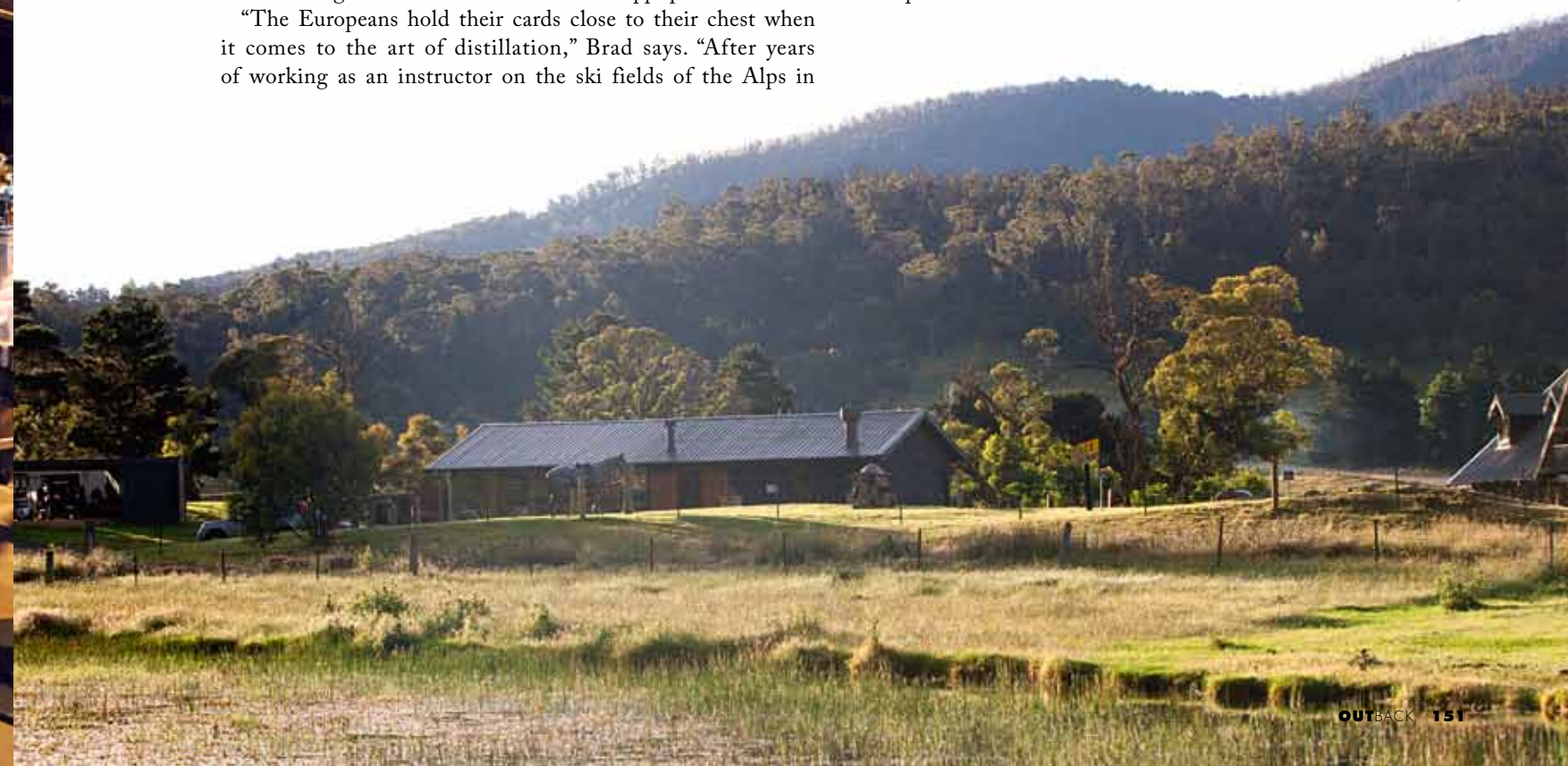


the Austrian Tirol, I began to refine my taste for the finest schnapps," he says. In the years leading up to the establishment of the distillery, Brad carried out research into the ideal selection of fruits to use.

"Now, when we take samples to Europe, they go for the Pink Lady because of its high sugar content. They can't match it in Europe because it's not grown there. And they also like the native peppermint, which has a lovely mild flavour, unlike some of the sharper mints." Other flavours include butterscotch, mango, peach, Pear William, sour apple and raspberry.

"A shot of the peach schnapps marries perfectly with champagne," Brad says. "A year or so ago, we added Kosciuszko vodka 101 to the list. It's made with a fruit base of grapes and is very smooth with a slight sweetness."

Brad comes from a family of cooks (his family ran a country pub near Albury, NSW, for many years), which explains his interest in experimenting with different flavours. Production involves choosing fruit of the highest quality with rich flavours; the fruit is de-stalked, sliced, diced and processed by machine with the stones and pips remaining whole. The fruit is then crushed, a necessary step for successful fermentation, which takes place in vats at controlled temperatures in a cool room for specific periods of time. The fermented pulp is then loaded into the imported Ulrich Kothe still and distilled. "This is a critical



DINING

MOUNTAIN SNOW GUGGELHUPF

150g plain flour, sifted
50g almond meal
1 teaspoon baking powder
200g caster sugar
200g softened butter
4 eggs
Zest of 2 small lemons
2 tablespoons lemon juice

Preheat oven to moderate (180°C/160°C fan-forced). Grease and flour a 22cm Guggelhupf mould (or cake tin with hole in the middle). Process flour, almond meal, baking powder, sugar, butter and eggs in a food processor for about a minute – until just combined (do not over process). Stir in zest and lemon juice. Pour into mould and bake for 45-55 minutes.

Icing:

Combine juice of 1/2 lemon with icing sugar. Stir until smooth and ice cake (make sure it is not too runny).



ABOVE: Monika's famous Mountain Snow Guggelhupf, a beautiful lemon-and-almond cake that resembles snow-capped peaks.

LEFT: Diners enjoy the marriage of Aussie and Austrian influences at Wild Brumby Schnapps.

point in the process that has been perfected to produce a crisp clean schnapps," Brad says. "The spirit from the still is aged in vats then blended and is now ready to be bottled and enjoyed."

Apart from tasting and buying schnapps, you can also partake of good, hearty, mountain food with dishes such as veal schnitzel, an Austrian-style salad with kassler, beef gulasch (high-country beef with sauteed potatoes) and lamb ragout (slow cooked Monaro lamb and vegetables served with rice). Just the thing to energise you after a day skiing or walking in the mountains.

For dessert – or afternoon tea – there's an irresistible array of cakes to choose from, including Monika's famous Mountain Snow Guggelhupf (an Austrian lemon-and-almond cake with an icing reminiscent of snow-capped peaks), a flourless chocolate torte, a stained glasshouse cake and vanilla cupcakes.

Monika runs the kitchen and her presence can be felt in every nook and cranny. Since starting with a pot of gulasch on the menu just five years ago, the restaurant has expanded at a phenomenal rate. "We now employ five chefs," Monika says. "Earlier this year we opened Knickerbocker (formerly Credo) in the Thredbo village opposite the chapel. The chefs rotate between the two restaurants."

While Knickerbocker is more upmarket than Wild Brumby, the menu is geared to active hungry people with dishes such as pork hock and pork knuckle. For dessert, there's the traditional and rather quirky sounding Kaiserschmarrn (Emperor's Joke), a diced pancake covered in icing sugar and pureed apple.

Brad's snow-based paintings, some of which are for sale in the Wild Brumby shop, are pretty good too – but these days he's so busy making schnapps, serving customers and playing his accordion that he has little time left for painting.

WILD BRUMBY SCHNAPPS

The Thredbo Valley distillery and cafe is at the corner of Wollondibby Road and the Alpine Way, Jindabyne, NSW.

Phone: (02) 6457 1447 www.wildbrumby.com

