

AS SEEN IN
THE WANDERER
AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST RV CLUB MAGAZINE

EARTHLY *pleasures*

Travellers to Griffith stop not just for the town's gastronomic delights, but to visit its growers and producers offering behind the scenes farm tours and mouth-watering culinary experiences

WORDS BY CATHY ANDERSON PICS SUPPLIED

*Hermit's Cave Lookout towards
Cocoparra National Park*

When I was a young girl, my mother and I traded the bright lights of Sydney for the small Riverina town of Cootamundra.

Coota was (and still is) a gorgeous small town with wide streets lined with that famous, vibrant wattle, but it was a culture shock too – it was so quiet compared to the city. Sydney was an arduous six-hour drive in mum’s ancient Hillman Hunter, so a trip to the ‘Big Smoke’ then became a visit to our larger neighbour, Griffith. Look, a supermarket! A set of traffic lights!

And today, Griffith continues to deliver on the innovation – and excitement – fronts.

A thriving metropolis steeped in Italian heritage and renowned for its salami, great wine and pizza, it is also home to crops of all kinds harvested throughout the year, as well as increasingly exciting farming techniques. Thanks to its Mediterranean climate and

the nourishing water of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, the Griffith area sustains farmland and aquaculture.

“The diversity of industry and scale of production makes Griffith a unique agricultural region,” says Paige Campbell, Marketing and Promotions Officer with Griffith City Council.

“The Griffith region is home to the largest citrus region in NSW; we grow 95 per cent of Australia’s prunes, much of Australia’s rice, and we’re a significant region for chicken meat production. We also grow barley for beer production, have a craft brewery, and the Riverina is Australia’s largest wine producing region making all of your favourites plus lesser known Italian varietals such as Fiano, Aglianico and Nero D’Avola.”

Travellers to the region are increasingly stopping not just for the fine dining restaurants in town and the cellar doors in the

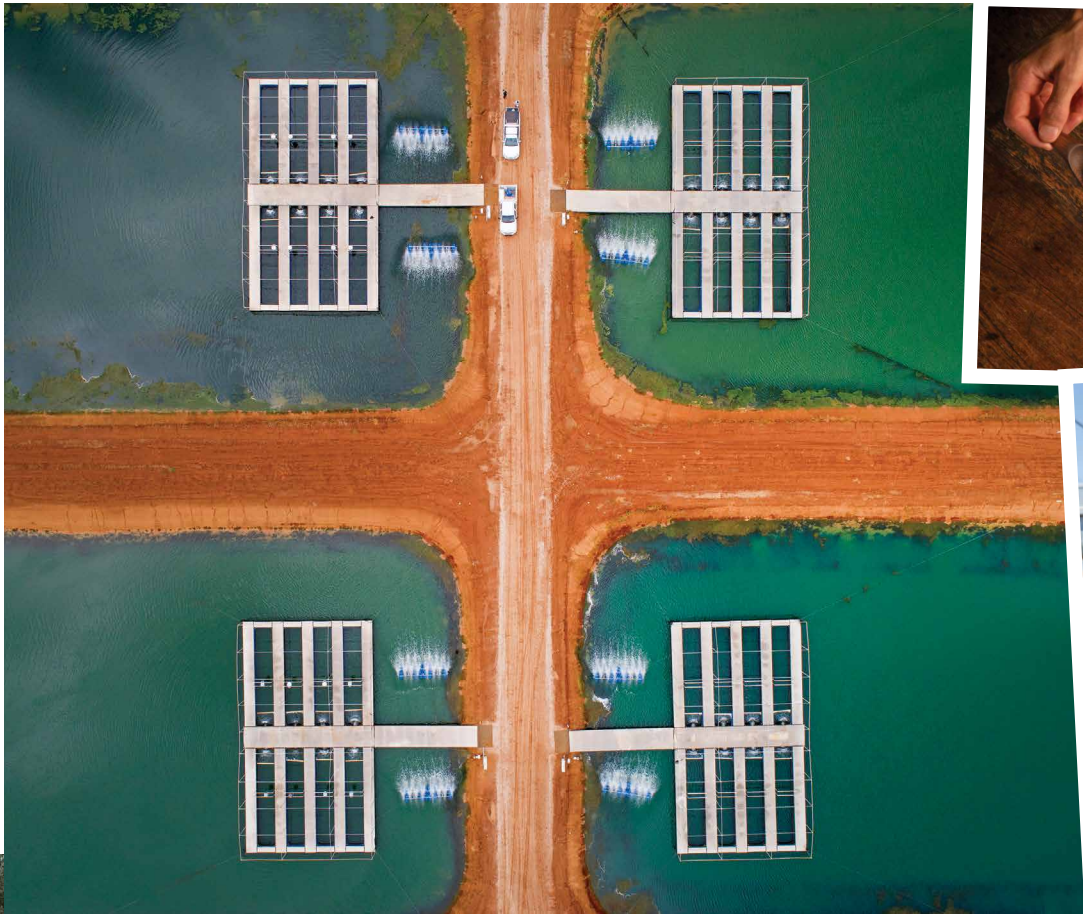
nearby vineyards, they are also taking an interest in the producers themselves.

Cassandra Smeeth, owner of local company Bella Vita Bar & Tours which creates bespoke tours to local producers, has seen an increasing flow of motorhome and caravan travellers to the region.

“In tourism and food scenes there has been a huge shift in people wanting to know where and how their produce is grown and where it comes from,” she told *The Wanderer*.

“We have a strong clientele of RVers, who call ahead to find the best campsites. They love knowing about the history of the area and finding the unique producers and hearing their stories. Our produce has amazing quality and usually they stock up on salamis, olive oils and wines while on tour.”

Here we showcase three local growers who are contributing to this burgeoning community.



Clockwise from above: Aquana aerial view of the ponds; freshly cooked fish - from ‘pond-to-plate’; local farmer, Mat Ryan

AQUANA SUSTAINABLE MURRAY COD

Several years ago local farmer Mat Ryan decided to make a ‘sea change’ from farming the land and stumbled on to aquaculture - specifically growing Murray cod, a local fish.

A conversation with a local chef, who said the fish was great but a lack of reliable supply meant it wasn’t included on the menu, spurred him and his family to investigate further.

“I wanted to stay in agriculture and I always had a passion for developing things new and different,” he told *The Wanderer*. “Wild-caught fish catches, both ocean and freshwater, are dwindling and demand for seafood is going up. It is one of the few industries in agriculture that I could see some potential short to medium term for growth.”

Through funding and capital raising, Aquana Murray Cod operates a ‘pond-to-plate’ philosophy where cod eggs are

hatched in a hatchery in nearby Grong Grong and, once they reach 0.8g, are then transferred to the indoor nursery at the purpose-built facility near Griffith. Once they reach 100g, they are transferred to giant outdoor ponds, where water is pumped through to replicate a natural river flow, essentially mimicking their natural habitat as much as possible. The fish are then harvested at between 1kg and 2kg+ for various markets (Asian cuisine and top-end city restaurants around Australia).

The process is also highly sustainable. Water is pumped into the outdoor ponds, but when fish waste levels become high, it is pumped back out to be distributed to local farms, and the ponds are topped up with fresh water.

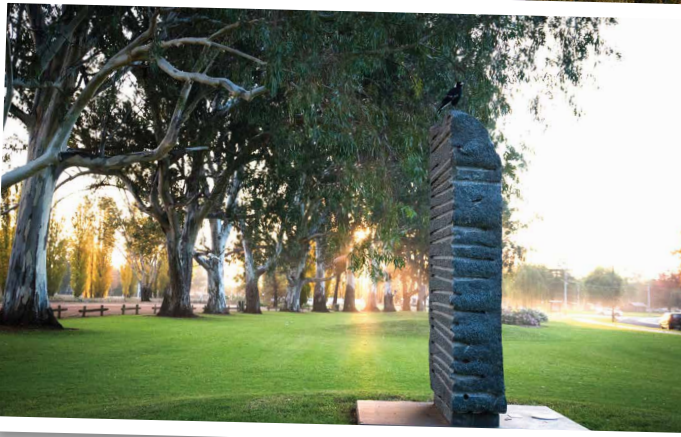
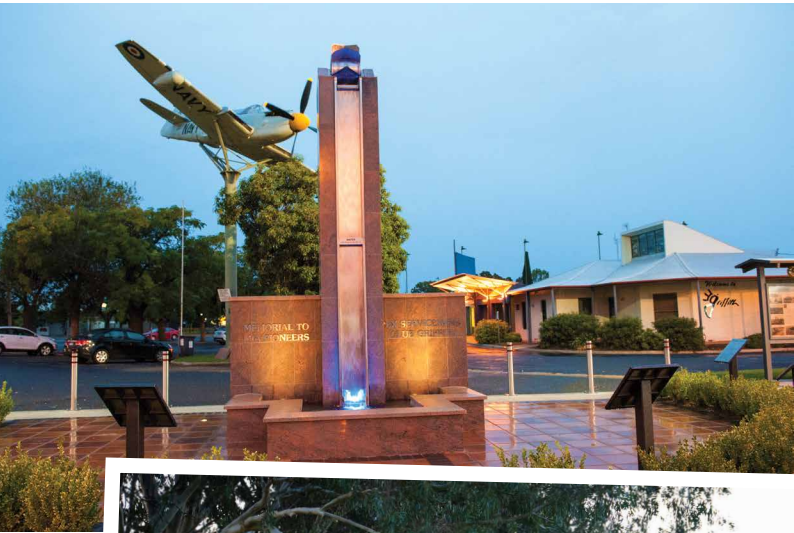
“One of the problems with aquaculture is the waste product that could potentially pollute the environment whereas we are utilising that waste product, so in a lot of ways we are growing two

crops with every megalitre of water that comes on to the farm.

“If we are going to continue to feed the world moving forward, I think it is really important to have a low ecological footprint and be sustainable because we have to be able to grow our food production but we won’t be able to do that if we continue to destroy the land which we are using. That is the ethos of most farmers these days - they want to see the land improve so that is it here for future generations to use.”

The company has just won the Excellence in Innovation Award at the NSW Business Chamber Awards, but Ryan says it is a team effort.

“That award is as much a credit to the region as it is to our business,” he said. “A lot of things we do in our company is the product of the region and the town and the smart people we have here that allow us to be able to innovate.”



Clockwise from top left: Griffith Visitor Centre; cellar door hopping; the quaint main street of Griffith; Centenary Sculptures Walk





Clockwise from top left: Fresh and dried prunes are a versatile fruit for every occasion

AUSTRALIAN PRUNES

Griffith produces 95 per cent of Australia's prunes which is around 3500 tonnes, but this is less than half of what Australians consume, according to Australian Prune Industry Chairperson and local farmer Grant Delves.

Prunes are the dried version of the d'agen sugar plum, and arrived in Australia around WWI from their ancestral home in Argon, in the Bordeaux region of France.

"We have a Mediterranean climate in Griffith," he said. "Prunes are a deciduous plum tree and they go dormant during the winter. They love cold winters and frosts when they are dormant. And in summer we have good warm to hot dry summers which make it ideal."

The plums are harvested by hand for the fresh fruit market each January, and the fruit that remains on the trees is left to become sweeter. In February another harvest is done,

this time mechanical, and the plums are dried to become prune form, then sent to two local Australian firms for de-seeding and packaging.

Prune farmers, of which there are about 40 in the local areas, are actually jacks of all trades in a fashion.

"Most of us grow things other than prunes – I grow wine grapes as well and I grow citrus," he said. "In the Griffith area we call them fruit salad farms so you can have a mixture of a few different things. It's a bit of diversification."

Most people know prunes are great to help things along when you are feeling backed up, but new research commissioned by the Association reveals prunes can also help to reduce bone loss and preserve bone density in postmenopausal women.

"We always get the prune jokes – I have heard them all, believe me," he said. We don't shy away from that

aspect of prunes – they are high in fibre and a great laxative – but there is so much more to prunes. We are really excited about the research. Plus, they have been linked to muscle recovery, inflammatory response activity, brain health and general biotic gut health. They are not just for old people – the earlier you start eating prunes (men and women) the bigger the health benefits you receive and the better bone health outcomes as you get older."

Delves said he is incredibly proud for Griffith to be known as the 'prune capital of Australia' and that the number of RV visitors to prune farms is increasing.

"I see streams of Grey Nomads going north at the beginning of winter and then I see them all coming south at the end of winter so I do know there are a lot that come through Griffith. There are a number of people who do farm tours in Griffith."

FRESH TECHNIQUE

Grace Ruberto and Dan Monteleone are a young couple who grew up in farming families and have a combined passion for agriculture. They created Fresh Technique – a hydroponic farm with a magnificent, automated greenhouse that houses thousands of Asian herbs and leafy green plants.

The pair manage their crops from seed to harvest and pride themselves on delivering their produce within 48 hours of it being picked. Griffith's location is partly why they chose to establish Fresh Technique in the region.

"Griffith, and the Riverina, is a vibrant, ever-growing region, which offers great opportunities for growth and we have also found it to be an extremely supportive and positive community culture," Grace said.

Hydroponic farming works using water and a nutrient solution in place of traditional soil and

fertilisers. Grace said plants are fed water continually which strengthens them and allows them to be more resistant to pests and disease. The 1200 sqm greenhouse has a retractable roof that helps to limit damage and increase production of crops such as rocket, spinach, wombok, basil, watercress, red and green coral lettuce and much more.

"The greenhouse is completely automated, so much so, that we can operate the roof and irrigation components from an application on our phones," she said. "It is equipped with a weather station which, once we set certain parameters (based on our climate), will open and close as it needs to relative to what is happening with the weather."

"For example; if it was to detect that it will start raining the roof will close over to protect the plants and at high temperatures it will turn

on the misting system to cool the plants down."

Sustainability and efficiency are high priorities for these modern farmers, who promote that they use less land, less water and less intervention. The plants are grown on an automated moving gully system, so seedlings are planted at one end of the greenhouse and move slowly to the other end as they mature and are then harvested. There are no internal pathways in the greenhouse as they take up valuable growing space.

Grace said the pair have a very clear vision for the future. "Our vision is to set a benchmark for sustainable farming practices, maximise efficiencies and use of resources to feed the growing population both domestically and internationally and importantly, to enable our own future generations to continue the farming tradition we love," she said.



Clockwise from above: Hydroponic farming has become a more sustainable means of growing our food



JOURNEY PLANNER



GETTING THERE

Griffith is 575km from Sydney along the Hume Highway and 366km from Canberra. Several companies operate foodie-style tours to both wineries and food producers in the area.

Griffith is an RV Friendly Town. There is free camping at The Willows, a grassed park on the bank of the main canal, just a short walk to the Banna Avenue for dinner or breakfast. The park offers water, toilets, BBQ area and a dump point.

Travellers are welcome to stay one night. There is a three-night free camping option at Lake Wyangan with great water views across the lake, there are walking tracks, a toilet block, BBQ and a boat ramp.

MORE INFO

Visit www.visitgriffith.com.au



Griffith is an agricultural powerhouse showcasing abundant produce, wine and culture. Located in Southern NSW it is the perfect destination to relax and learn. Visit Griffith this Easter for the chance to taste all our region has on offer.

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