



**THE CURIOUS
 COOK**
 Judith Elen

A labour of love bears fruit

ELENNE Ford is a practising barrister, organic-ginger grower and full-time dream-chaser. She offers self-catering stays on her high-country property in the Glasshouse Mountains north of Brisbane, farm tours, conference set-ups and cooking classes run by chef Oskar Schlapa. Yet she still finds time to wander around the estate with me in search of a platypus.

Mango Hill Farm is Ford's dream. I'm staying in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley and, early this morning, hit the Bruce Highway out of town, aiming for Glasshouse Mountains Scenic Drive, which weaves through native forest with weirdly dramatic anthill-like peaks guarding the horizon, to Peachester. Now I am on the lookout for that platypus.

As we walk, the land slopes away on three sides into a valley of trees, blue mountains etching the horizon. Ford's 5ha property ranges up hill and down dale, across creeks where ducks idle beneath overhanging branches or float under bridges, through native forest and past fields planted with ginger. The original mango trees have been reduced to a few hundred, replaced by 1ha of organic ginger (every little weed has to be pulled by hand, Ford says). Two alpacas, a dozen chickens, ducks and a goose share the scene with kingfishers, swamp hens, snapping turtles and cormorants.

A 500sq m kitchen garden includes organic fruit, vegetables and herbs. This is where Schlapa comes in, Ford tells me. Schlapa's cooking classes start here, collecting armfuls of still-breathing produce for the cooking class and, later, lunch.

When Ford bought Mango Hill in 2002 it was overgrown with lantana and replete with ancient farm buildings, mud in the pipes and no running water. After unclogging the pipes, her first mission was to dig the potager, and it feels appropriate to use the French term instead of just plain old kitchen garden, but neither is it strictly formal, overflowing as it is with a profusion of edible plants. Avocados, pears, nectarines, mandarins, lemons, guavas and macadamia nuts grow here. It's all work for local residents. Two sisters, Joy and Catherine, look after the garden, Leanne makes ice cream, Margaret is operations manager at the farm. People come and go in trucks. Someone in the village makes legendary cream-and-lemonade scones for Devonshire teas.

Ford does not live here but comes regularly to take care of things. She is certainly here often enough to feel put out that the goose, Goosie Lucie, has abandoned her to take up the role of baby protector to a family of wild ducks.

A gracious, airy Queenslander, Dovecote Cottage, part of the accommodation, was transported by road from Maryborough. We sit for a moment on the veranda near a jacaranda tree, sipping nectar-like pineapple juice, which Ford has just pressed (I get the feeling she is always doing something). To one side is a covered sales and function centre of modern corrugated iron, covered in potato vines. This is where cooking classes are held and the farm's ginger, plain and Belgian chocolate-coated, dried mango slices and turmeric are sold. (Look for these products at United Organics in Brisbane, Sydney's Eco Farms, or via the Mango Hill Farm website.)

There is also an original, restored family sized house, The Farmhouse, with separate wings, comfortable furnishings, photographs and found objects, down among the towering New England blackbutt trees by the creek.

At the cooking classes, Schlapa uses the abundant produce of the region. There is olive oil from South Burnett 40km away, avocado oil from Maleny, and avocados in season from the neighbour's farm. A farmer nearby grows an old-style Italian roma tomato, Schlapa tells me; unfortunately it's out of season when I visit. Kingaroy still produces peanuts, but also kalamata and manzanilla olives, oils and tapenade.

Schlapa, with professional experience here and in Europe, returned from Germany five years ago where he had been studying hospitality administration following stints at the InterContinental Southern Cross, in Darwin and Vanuatu. He and his wife, Suzan, have set up Pasta dVine, a cafe, delicatessen and supply shop of heavenly homemade goodies in Beerwah, 9km on the other side of Peachester.

Schlapa gives me an abbreviated class — and not-so-abbreviated lunch — that features portobello mushroom salad and a Thai salad of warm prawns in a melange of coriander, snow peas, garlic, crushed coriander roots, kaffir lime leaves, all from the garden, collected two minutes earlier. There's Tasmanian salmon in sorrel (from the garden) sauce with wild rice, saltimbocca with handmade pasta and a luscious Bavarian pudding.

I dream of staying, reading on the veranda, wildlife-spotting as I mooch about the property, then ambling down to Beerwah for Oskar's homemade pasta or slow-braised veal shanks with polenta for lunch. The beach is half-an-hour's drive away, but I probably wouldn't make it.

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Secret garden: Profusion of plants at Mango Hill Farm