

headforthehills

In the shadow of Mt Beerwah, a home among the gum trees on a thriving organic farm fulfils a country fantasy.

Words **Cathy Osmond**

I had a dream of my perfect rural retreat, and it looked like this. A little farm with rich soil and lush gardens, perhaps some crops, a creek and chooks and native creatures in a slice of forest. There would be a beautiful old timber house with sweeping verandahs on which to while away cocktail hour. There'd be food picked from a kitchen garden, happy dirty kids drifting in at sunset and pillowy brass beds. And somehow – this is a dream, right – all this would involve a minimum of hard yards spent with actual farm equipment.

Elenne Ford had the same kind of vision, although hers extended to rather more hard yakka than mine. And she really meant it: by December 2002, the Brisbane-based barrister was crying out for her piece of paradise. On Christmas Day, she and husband Peter came to see five hectares for sale 9km from tiny Peachester in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, a mango stone's throw from Mt Beerwah; she fell in love, and by 2003 it was hers.

In five years, Elenne and a team of hardworking locals have transformed the neglected mango farm into a thriving organic business. Some of the mango trees have made way for aprons of certified organic ginger and turmeric. More fruit and native trees have been planted, the creek relieved of its tangle of lantana and an impressive potage garden planted with everything from peas and carrots to



tamarillos and countless herbs. More recently came the push into the farmstay market, with the renovation of the creekside farmhouse (sleeps seven) and the relocation from Maryborough of Dovecote Cottage (*pictured*, sleeps four).

"I want that one!" I thought as we crossed a picture-postcard stone bridge and caught sight of the cottage (*below*) on her hillside perch. And indeed she was ours. Inside we found two bedrooms with double brass beds; a cosy loungeroom with all the technology you'd want, including cable TV; a full eat-in kitchen, a sparkling white bathroom and separate laundry. French doors opened to the wide verandah, with its wicker chairs, hammock and views over the ginger and fruit down to the creek.

A gumbooted Elenne had greeted us by the function centre/conference facility, which caters

for four groups, events and corporate retreats. Inside is a kitchen where chef Oskar Schlapa hosts cooking classes using local produce. The proximity of Dovecote Cottage to this centre worried me, but Elenne – who lives off-site and is a genuine champion of guests' right to personal space – assured me that tour groups and classes are only booked for weekdays. On a weekend, chances are you won't see another soul.

And so it was that after collecting eggs and showing us how to feed snow peas to alpacas Pancho and Buccaneer, spot koalas in the gums and look out for platypuses, Elenne left us to it.

In our fridge, along with breakfast provisions, were two of Oskar's delicious pasta sauces and nests of fresh fettuccine. A fruit bowl was heavy with produce. The next day we'd visit Caloundra's Sunday markets, hit the beach and return to fire up the barbie. We poured some wine and took to the verandah to survey our dominion. All that was left to do was choose a salad from the garden before the sun fell behind the gums. And dream on.

THE PLACE Mango Hill Farm, 159 Commissioners Flat Rd, Peachester, Sunshine Coast hinterland
PH (07) 5494 9329

WEBLINK www.mangohillfarm.com

THE DEAL Dovecote Cottage \$352 per night; The Farmhouse \$385. Min. two nights' stay. Breakfast hamper for two, \$45. Other food packs on request.

MUSTDO.

ENJOY organic food and live music next Sunday when Mango Hill welcomes the public from 10am-4pm. It's on the Open Garden calendar only twice a year. Entry \$5.

MAKE time during your group tour or farmstay to visit the farm shop for fresh ginger and turmeric, dried mangoes, ginger (choc-clad or naked) and liquorice. Ice-cream with mango, ginger or Belgian chocolate is made on-site.

