

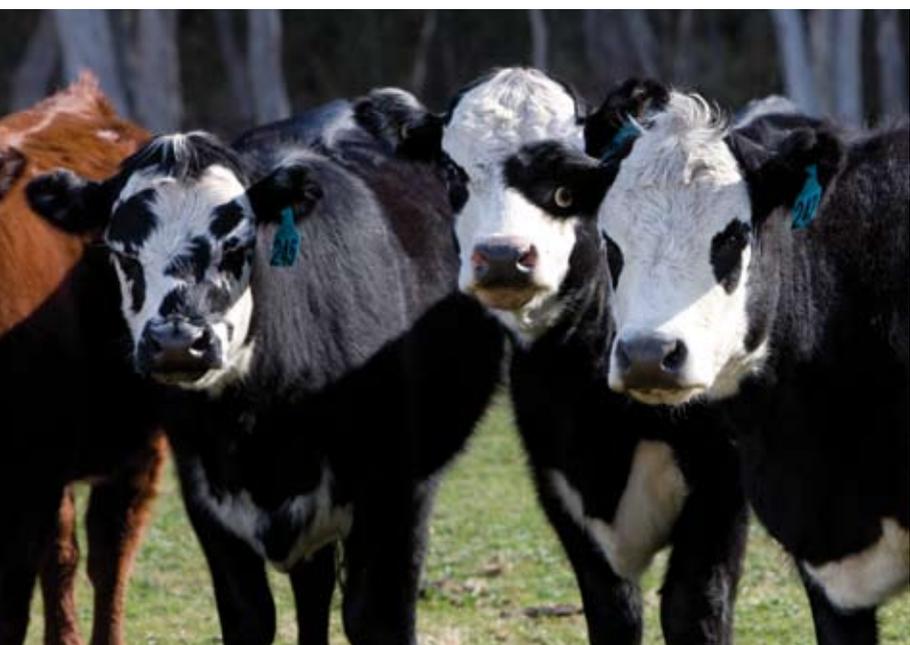
the good life at *redleaf*



Katrina and Sam Sparke rear free-range pigs, lambs and cattle – and four lucky free-range children – at an idyllic Fitzroy Falls property, *Redleaf Farm*. Katrina tells DEBORAH McINTOSH how a city girl found herself producing boutique meat for some of the Highlands finest restaurants

PHOTOGRAPHS **TONY SHEFFIELD**





DON'T THINK I HAVE EVER FELT AS INADEQUATE AS I DO after 90 minutes in the company of Katrina Sparke. Over coffee she details day-to-day life at *Redleaf Farm*, which involves building ironbark fences, laying slate in her renovated '80s house, and killing and cooking her own chickens, lambs and pigs. Minutes after her two-year-old daughter wakes, we're out feeding pigs in multiple paddocks; next thing she's driving the three of us on a quad bike to visit the property's waterhole and waterfall. Who built the stone fire pit near the waterhole? She did of course. Then she apologises for the dead sheep we pass in a paddock. It was suffering so her husband shot it and left it so the smell will tempt a fox that's been nabbing lambs. The plan is that when her wolfhound Guinness barks at night, Katrina will leap out of bed, shoot the fox and – I swear this is true – run out in

the dark immediately to skin it. "I hate to think of it dying in vain," she says. "They stink, but they make a lovely pelt."

When not channelling Annie Oakley, Katrina is bringing up four children, Rex, 9, Phoenix, 7, Chilli, 6, and Sapphire, 2, who were the impetus for this unconventional life. She and her husband Sam bought *Redleaf Farm* six years ago so their children would experience the joys of growing up on the land. "And here I am, a pig farmer," says Katrina. "Who knew?"

For three years now, Redleaf Farm's chemical-free suckling

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: REX, PHOENIX AND CHILLI AT THE WATERHOLE; WELCOME TO REDLEAF; PHOENIX, CHILLI AND ONE OF THE PIGLETS; ANGUS CROSS HEIFERS. OPPOSITE PAGE: THE SPARKE FAMILY, PHOENIX, KATRINA, REX, SAPPHIRE, SAM AND CHILLI, WITH IRISH WOLFHOUNDS WHISKEY AND GUINNESS; GEESSE AND THEIR GOSLINGS.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: POPPY AND HER PIGLETS; JACK, A SHIRE HORSE; A PEACOCK VISITS THE PIGS.

pigs have been on the menu at Bowral's Biota Dining (the restaurant received a prized two hat rating from *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* in September). Other buyers include Josh's Cafe and Bendooley Estate in Berrima, and The Four in Hand in Paddington. The Sparkes also sell beef and lamb, producing all their meat as organically as possible. Their lamb sales were prompted by Biota's James Viles when he came to check out their piglets and noticed the sheep. "We thought our lamb was great but when you have a hatted chef saying, 'That's the most delicious lamb I've ever had, when can I get more?' you go, 'Our lamb's all right, let's do lamb'."

Before becoming a farmer, Katrina grew up in Sydney and worked as a graphic designer. Her mother is nutritionist Rosemary Stanton. "I always had the benefit of eating well and understanding the importance of good food." Her parents built a passive solar house at Barrengarry (near Kangaroo Valley) 25 years ago.

Sam grew up in Goondiwindi in Queensland and his parents owned a sugarcane farm in Bundaberg. He now runs his own business, supplying emergency services and security to mining and maritime organisations, but is able to spend most of his time at *Redleaf Farm*.

The couple met in Sydney and bought their first home on five acres in Cambewarra, between Kangaroo Valley and Nowra. When they missed out on buying land next-door, they started looking for a larger property and found 28 hectares at Fitzroy Falls. The property boasted a swimming hole and waterfall just a few hundred metres from the house. It also adjoined State forest and had 22 hectares of farmable land. The house was "an ugly,

yellow brick home from the '80s" but the couple looked past it.

"It was such a beautiful property, it was an easy vision," says Katrina. "We saw the creek and the waterfall and Sam said, 'You can fix up any house – you can't make this. This is the stuff that legendary childhood memories are made of'."

"The kids can ride motorbikes or horses or go camping. They can make themselves a shelter and stay overnight and I know they're still at home. My six-year-old and even my two-year-old can climb down the rope to the bottom of the waterfall. There's so much scope for, 'Let's just go exploring this afternoon, Mum'. They love it."

The Sparkes initially planned to build a grand home on a hill but settled for renovating when they realised there were other things to spend money on. "Nice fences cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, so we've done most of the fencing ourselves because we had more time than money when we moved here. It's basically get the generator on the back of the quaddy, drag your posts, get them in, repeat."

"We recently upgraded to a new tractor which has been my husband's dream. I think it was possibly the driving force behind him wanting the property – turns out it was all about Sam getting a tractor!"

After fencing, the next expense was pasture improvement. "There were so many things we didn't know about farming and it never occurred to me to get a soil test. It doesn't matter what animal you're farming, if you can grow better grass, you will have better animals. Our soil wasn't fantastic, and it costs money to improve your soil, especially organically."



“This isn’t about mass producing but about trying to do something really well.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SAM’S PRIZED TRACTOR; THE FAMILY ON THE JETTY; PHOENIX ON THE FLYING FOX; ONE OF THE REDLEAF HEIFERS; SHEEP ON THE RUN.

The land came with a dozen beef cattle which were quite mad, says Katrina. “They were pure bred Limousins – French, redheads, female – three good reasons why they’d be mad.” The couple eventually sold them and now have an Angus bull and Angus and Hereford heifers.

Next they got chickens and sheep, intending only to produce their own meat. “The satisfaction of growing and providing food for your family is something that’s lost in today’s society. It’s very easy to buy dinner at the supermarket. I don’t like killing things but in order to have a good, balanced diet, killing is part of it. To be physically able to do it and to know what I’m feeding my family is incredibly rewarding.

“Sometimes I look at chicken breasts in a shop and think, what animal did that come from? If it’s a real chicken running around scratching for its food, no way is it that big. It takes a couple of chickens to feed my family because they’re not big, hormone-pumped, exercise-less birds. They’re far more muscular and less fatty.”

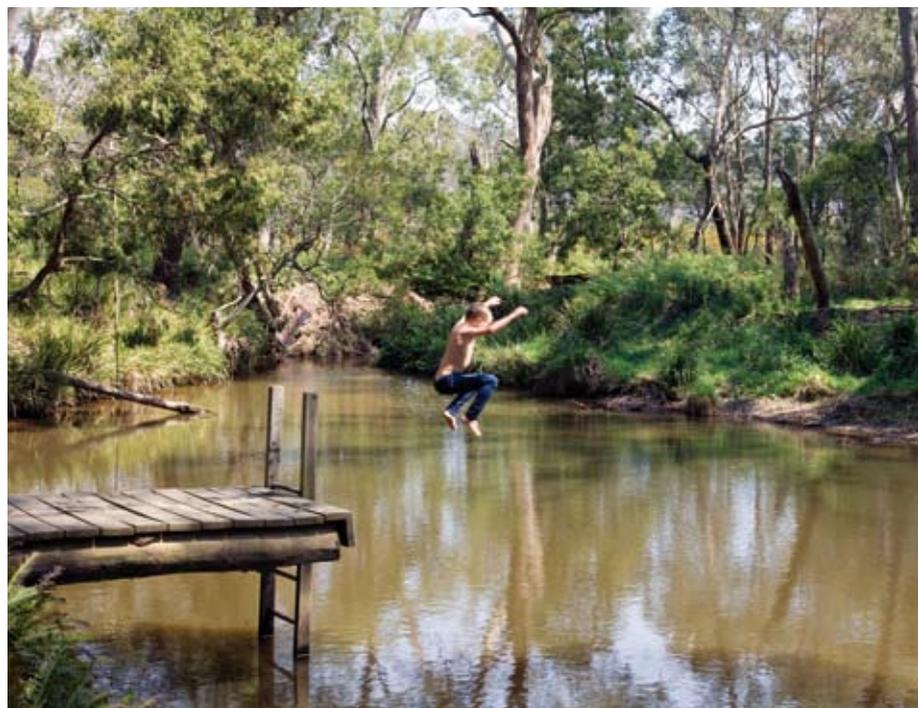
Sam usually kills lambs for the family, skinning them and hanging them for three days. Katrina does the butchering “because I’m neater at doing the chopping up, putting the meat in labelled bags and getting it in the freezer”. “We thought it tasted so good because we knew where it came from, but we soon realised friends would say, ‘That’s the best lamb I’ve ever tasted.’”

The pigs were the next addition – mainly with family dinner in mind but also tentative business plans. Katrina had found a concrete area at the back of a shed and an old neighbour told her that 30 years before, some Italian brothers built it for pigs. “I’d always wanted pigs, so I checked out council regulations and bought two saddleback sows.”

Eighteen months later she bought a boar, although she nearly didn’t because of his name. “The owners said he was gentle for a boar and even came when you called him, but his name was Sam the Ham. I said, ‘I can’t have him, my husband’s called Sam’. But instead of getting upset, my husband decided to name everything



“You can fix up any house – you can’t make this. This is the stuff that legendary childhood memories are made of.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WALKING PAST SOME OF THE IRONBARK FENCES BUILT BY SAM AND KATRINA; THE WATERHOLE IS MORE THAN FOUR METRES DEEP; ONE OF SEVERAL ROOSTERS CALLED SAM; THE FAMILY AND THEIR TRACTOR.

on the farm with breeding rights Sam. So we have Sam the Ram, and several roosters running around with names like Yellow Sam and White Sam.”

Four months later the sows, Pepper and Ginger, produced piglets, and Sam dropped into Biota Dining to see if they might make the menu. “(Chef and owner) James came out the next day and said, ‘I’ll have all of them’ because he was starting up and wanting local produce.”

Katrina now has seven sows (the others are Nutmeg, Vanilla, Clove, Poppy and Curly) which each produce three litters every two years. Young sows produce six or seven piglets; an older sow recently produced 13.

“I’m very attached to our mummies. The piglets are super cute when they come out, and then they just start getting super naughty. They’re into everything and they’re like a gaggle of naughty children. They know they’re not meant to be somewhere and they see you and almost giggle with each other as they tear back through the fence.”

Katrina has 20 piglets running around on the day I visit and they’re a beautiful sight, cute little black and white bundles actually gambolling in green paddocks. Saddleback pigs are grazing animals, says Katrina, whereas some modern (pink) pigs don’t function well on grass. They also get fed bread, fruit and vegetables when they’re available.

Meat to be sold must come from a registered abattoir so Katrina takes most of her piglets to Picton. “I like to get them there within the hour they’re going to be killed so they don’t have to sit around in pens all day. They’re hung for a couple of days and they have to leave in refrigerated transportation, so I pay a meat carter to deliver them direct to the restaurants.”

The Sparkes have had such success with Redleaf Farm pork



that they plan to reduce their lamb production. They currently have 80 ewes and will cut back to 30; the beef is also more of a sideline business. “This isn’t about mass producing but about trying to do something really well.

“We both have other sources of income (Katrina still does graphic design work). We do this because we want our kids to live on a productive farm, and one that is producing something of quality in the best possible way.”

At the same time, the junior Sparkes have the benefit of living in a children’s paradise, with regular family gatherings by the waterhole. Kids dive and swim, play on the swings and scramble over various forts. “We can sit here with friends and cook on the barbecue and the kids are happy for hours.”

And Katrina has the fun of running out in the night to protect her lambs. Two nights after this interview, she got her fox. **HL**