



Dairy Flat Lodge, above. From left: the Bakehouse; communing with bees; harvesting produce from the gardens

FRESH FROM THE FARM

Daylesford's appeal as a foodie magnet is a growing concern

PATRICIA MAUNDER

In 1984, when Lake House restaurant opened 100km northwest of central Melbourne, regional destination dining wasn't a thing in Australia. The eatery's location in the town of Daylesford was an obscure spot on the map. Chef and co-founder Alla Wolf-Tasker's call for seasonal local produce, especially varieties sidelined by industrial-scale agriculture, produced a sack of potatoes. Her ambition to create the kind of slow-food experience she had enjoyed in regional France seemed far-fetched.

Fast forward 40 years and Lake House is a renowned restaurant, hotel and spa, with flourishing plots producing fruits, vegetables and herbs at Dairy Flat, the property added to Wolf-Tasker's little empire in 2018. In the mix are 53 varieties of young apple trees, and six kinds of olives in an established grove. There are the usual veggie suspects, such as fat pumpkins spilling across volcanic soil, and unusual ones, including Chinese artichokes and a New Zealand yam called oca.

I'm admiring the cornucopia on a complimentary tour offered to guests of Dairy Flat Lodge, a six-suite rustic-chic pile where food, comfort and style are the essential ingredients in its recipe for the good life. Farm manager Pedro guides us around the 15ha property's heart, as magpies warble and kookaburras cackle in the bushland beyond. He invites us to pick and eat sweet strawberries and zingy lemon verbena, and says there's fishing gear for guests who'd like try their luck in the dam. This amiable Brazilian also shows us 2200 pinot noir and chardonnay vines, which produced their first vintage this year. He points to key aspects of this small-scale farm's sustainable, regenerative practices, including roaming guinea fowl and geese

that eat pesky bugs. He is not so fond of the wild ducks that conduct raids on the produce.

The bounty on the lodge's doorstep and its surrounds feeds body and soul from the moment concierge Michelle welcomes guests to the property. Another of the United Nations of hospitality professionals in Wolf-Tasker's team, the multi-tasking Canadian offers treats such as housemade limoncello, the farm's olives and, from Dairy Flat's bakehouse, crunchy-fluffy bread and a revelatory chocolate cookie-brownie hybrid.

She also prepares and serves dinner at the lodge, where pretty jumbles of flowers and foliage from the property enhance the hyperlocal focus. A series of mostly shared plates often feature Pedro's vegetables, including a ratatouille with perfect zucchini slices that surrender to the spoon. There is lamb (likely agisted here) in a luxurious jus, honeycomb from Dairy Flat's hive, and more bread. Abandon all diets, ye who enter here.

Next morning, Michelle conjures breakfast that includes made-to-order eggs and coffee, fresh fruit and pastries, each of which probably contains a day's worth of calories. She then invites us to see where Dairy Flat's baked pleasures are created. At the touch of a button, she reveals the Bakehouse's hidden entrance, in the floor beside the open kitchen (a more conventional doorway is just 50m from the lodge). At the tunnel's end two bakers, from Italy and The Philippines, and a French patissier give us a taste of the usual 2½ hour Introduction to Sourdough Baking class available to guests and the public. We get hands-on late in the 48-hour bread-making process, shaping cloud-soft dough then rolling triangles of buttery layered pastry. We each select our best proto-croissant, which are baked and served to their proud creators next morning.

Later, I do the full three-hour introductory beekeeping class. A local who is universally known as Dan the Bee Man covers plenty of territory, including pests, government regulation and how to avoid swarming, before leading his students outside, head-to-toe in white beekeeper suits. We gather round Dairy Flat's hive, from which Dan gently lifts wooden racks loaded with honeycomb and pulsing with bees. Back in the shed, he uses hand-cranked centrifugal force to extract the honey, which we sample – repeatedly.

Dairy Flat also schedules workshops according to nature's seasonal whims, including mushroom foraging, truffle hunting, berry picking and spring-harvest pickling and fermenting. There are other ways to pleasantly work up an appetite – soaking in your suite's clawfoot bath facing the bucolic view perhaps, or in the cedar hot tub overlooking those vines.

E-bikes are available to guests, putting tasty neighbours such as Istra Smallgoods and Passing Clouds winery within easy, breezy reach. I tootle up a quiet road to Daylesford Cider. Lush lawn, a woodfired pizza oven and paddle of seven handcrafted ciders – including the unfiltered, wild-fermented Cloudy Farmhouse – deliver instant satisfaction.

A stay at Dairy Flat Lodge is not complete without dining at its raison d'être, the restaurant that put Daylesford on the map as a tourist favourite. A leisurely e-bike ride or 10-minute drive away, Lake House will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year with special events in August and December. The restaurant continues to source ingredients of increasing diversity and quality from local suppliers. Lately, however, Dairy Flat has provided most of the produce showcased in the four-course menu's Art of the Vegetable options. I'm charmed by an Italian waiter, and delighted by floral displays and artful plating. Yet the greatest pleasure is savouring the tomatoes, zucchinis, broad beans, herbs, rhubarb and more. I taste the rich flavours of heirloom varieties, farm-to-table freshness, the passion of Pedro and his team, and Wolf-Tasker's ambition made real.

Patricia Maunder was a guest of Dairy Flat Lodge and Lake House.

IN THE KNOW

Two-night minimum stays at Dairy Flat Lodge are \$1970, twin-share, including breakfast, a lodge dinner, farm tour and use of amenities such as e-bikes; additional night \$790.

Exclusive use for up to 12 guests from \$5610 a night. Optional extra experiences include beekeeping (\$195) and sourdough baking (\$295).

dairyflatfarmdaylesford.com.au

Lake House restaurant is open for lunch Friday-Monday and dinner daily; multi-course a la carte menu \$210 a person.

lakehouse.com.au

Daylesford Cider is open 10am-5pm daily; tasting paddle \$25.

daylesfordcider.com.au