



# Local hero

Sourcing local food is one of the mantras of running a sustainable restaurant, but that can seem challenging when you've got limited local produce. Craig Squire of Ochre rose to the challenge—and has created something unique. **Lucy Robertson** reports

**O**n the website for his Cairns-based restaurant Ochre, chef and owner Craig Squire promises that “dining will never be the same again”. And while it’s a big call, there’s an element of truth in the slogan—at least, if you consider his lofty ambition for Australian cuisine. According to Squire, Ochre Restaurant and Grill is an example of what the nation’s collective appetite should be striving towards: cuisine that reflects its local environment, its regional surroundings and its wider bush culture. And while slow food miles and native foods are hardly a new concept, the degree of dedication that Squire shows his craft—and the passion he has for the politics behind it—just might be.

It’s easy to see what Ochre is about from a glance at its menu: wattle seed damper, barramundi spring rolls, paperbark-smoked spanner crab and an antipasto plate of emu pate, kangaroo terrine, crocodile wonton and pickled lemon myrtle. But the bush theme runs deeper than what’s on the paper.

“I believe in developing regional Australian cuisine and showcasing produce that’s indicative of the local area, enabling the region to show an ownership of its produce through its food,” Squire says, adding that there are some hip-pocket benefits to serving Australian on a plate.

“I’ve found a lot of international tourists are looking for a real Australian experience and food plays a big part in delivering that. It’s as much for tourism appreciation as anything else.”

But catering for international tourists is where the hip-pocket motivation ends for Squire. The rest is all heart: “There’s great value in using local food for a variety of reasons: the economic factor of supporting the local growers and suppliers; the environmental factor of reducing carbon outputs in transport and mass-production methods; and there’s a cuisine reason, which is one of the main drivers for me.

“On our current menu we have a lot of local produce, used to create a cuisine that’s genuine to the Queensland tropics. We use macadamia nuts, which are grown on the tablelands near us. We use local cold-pressed oils, like peanut and sunflower. We use native foods like finger limes, tamarind, papaya, Davidson plum and lemon aspen, which are all local bush foods.”

A peek into Ochre’s trophy cabinet shows that using the local flavour has paid off for Squire. A host of gongs from RCQ over several years—from Best Modern Restaurant to Best Tourism Restaurant—tops the awards list, which also includes mentions from the Australian Culinary Foundation, Brisbane’s Courier Mail and Queensland Tourism. Squire himself has also teetered on the edge of celebrity chefdom, with appearances on Channel Seven’s Mercurio’s Menu and as guest chef at several special functions around the world.

But not everyone is a fan, Squire counters. And ironically, the locals appear to be the hardest to please: “A lot of people love our native focus, but others are put off by it and will only eat what they know. In a small area like Cairns, there’s still an element of bogan-ism, so a lot of diners are after quantity over quality. It’s not that our meals are small, it’s just that people would sometimes rather everything came with a huge pile of chips.”

And while the chip-heavy US-style of dining might be on the way out thanks to rising obesity and a stronger health focus, Australians still aren’t good at analysing a menu with the same social conscience they apply to their grocery shop, Squire says.

“I’ve found that there’s a huge disconnect between people decid-



FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY: WENDY ASHBEURTON

Ochre's fare, clockwise from top left; hot smoked and peppered mackerel with seared Queensland scallops, pineapple chilli salsa, sand crab, avocado, tempura local prawns and wild lime dipping sauce; a bush tomato; kangaroo grilled with quandong chilli glaze.

ing they want to buy local and wanting to dine local. In a retail sense, consumers are catching on to the benefits of shopping local, but that concept hasn't translated to their dining out patterns. So they might go to the local farmers' market every week, but then buy a cheap Thai meal of imported prawns without even thinking about it."

According to Squire, this failure to demand local produce at the dining table means consumers aren't supporting the evolution of Australian cuisine. To encourage such support, chefs need to make more effort in sourcing produce, he says.

"You need to put more time into talking to local suppliers and producers, because these guys don't have the market-

ing support of big wholesalers behind them and so they often don't tell you about what they've got," Squire says, before arguing that the extra investment still pays off. "A lot of chefs say they're too busy to be chasing local growers all the time, but in many cases it's better than sticking with that big-name brand you've always used because the local equivalent is fresher and cheaper."

At Ochre, this concept of working with what's available is one of the keys to its success.

"We literally have an ocean of fresh seafood on our doorstep and a local industry that needs supporting, so we use a lot of that," Squire explains. "We use spanner crab from Hervey Bay, wonderful Queensland scallops, and wild barramundi."

And on the other side of the fence, there's a paddock of produce ready to be used.

"Our chicken comes from a local farmer, the emu is farmed a bit further south from here, and the crocodile comes from down the road. A new dairy

**"Our chicken is from a local farmer, the emu is farmed further south, and the crocodile comes from down the road."**

Craig Squire, Ochre, Cairns.

in town provides our buffalo mozzarella, milk, feta and table cheeses. We used to get local pork, but unfortunately the industry has been shut down—largely as a result of the buying patterns of the two major supermarkets, which can get a cheaper, mass-produced product from big southern farmers—they just didn't have the support they needed."

The pork problem raises a valid question about the chef's dedication to using local produce: where does the passion stop and the business sensibilities come in? Can you really have a menu without any pig products just because there's no local supplier?

"You have to be realistic," Squire admits. "There are some things we just can't get from here, including duck and lamb. So those meats come from small producers further south in Queensland and into northern NSW, usually sourced by a couple of suppliers I have good relationships with."

Purists might argue that this

defeats the slow food ideal and cheats the locals just as trucking in beef from Perth would, but Squire maintains in these cases, it comes back to the idea of creating a uniquely Australian cuisine. "Whenever we use produce that's sourced from further away, we infuse it with local flavours, so our duck is served with green papaya and local Malanda bamboo shoots with a native tamarind dressing."

And, he adds, even if products are not from the immediate area, the process of educating suppliers and consumers about the slow food ideal often has the same result in the long run.

"We used to see a lot of local produce going down the coast to the larger markets in Brisbane, and then all the way back up again to us, which is a 4000-kilometre round trip.

"Of course it's a lot easier for suppliers to get everything from the one head office rather than sourcing it all individually, but I think the tide is turning. Our supplier used to get his potatoes from Brisbane, but now they come from the Atherton Tablelands, which is just 50 kilometres away."

Part of the change in attitudes could be due to the fact that there's more food production in Tropical Queensland than there used to be, Squire suggests. The huge tracts of land planted with sugar cane in previous decades have given way to a smattering of niche

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crops in recent years, which could be responsible for the arrival of Cairns's first farmers' market recently.

"The region is becoming quite a food bowl, and it's great to see local support for local growers at the markets," Squire says.

It's not the first time he's thought about the marketing of local produce. In 1997, he helped

establish a business called Australian Tropical Foods (ATF), which was ostensibly a group of like-minded chefs, growers and tourism stakeholders from the area. After travelling to Adelaide to compete in a regional culinary competition, they realised they had a marketable product in the flavours of Queensland's tropics. "When we got back from

South Australia, we realised we'd started a sort of culture between emerging food producers and the wider industry, so we got some funding and the concept became to help people diversify into food production. It was a real time of change and it was great to see growers of produce like nuts, teas, wine and tropical fruits get a foot in the door through our networking."

But a few years into the project, the funding dried up and the group could no longer afford to pay the business's "marketer and motivator". Today, ATF exists purely online as an education and marketing tool for local chefs and suppliers. Squire says it's still a useful tool for restaurateurs wanting inspiration for infusing local flavours into their menu, albeit in a less strategic capacity than it originally was. Squire's experience at ATF

translates into his current role as chef and restaurateur more than he'd like, claiming Queensland policy-makers need to be more supportive of regional food producers and the restaurants that use their produce on menus.

"I think Tropical Queensland has a far greater variety of food product than the Margaret River or South Australia, but we are not as smart about how we market it to other states or promote it offshore," he says. "Regional restaurants are often the ones who are doing the most innovative and progressive things with their cuisine, but it seems it's a bit unknown and therefore just not written about."

But for now, at least, Cairns's local growers and suppliers have a dedicated fan in Craig Squire. And if his formula catches on, Australian dining may indeed never be the same again. □



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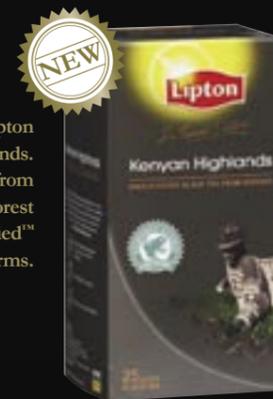
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