

Fiona and Lola the pregnant Jersey cow who provides a small group of neighbours with a daily supply of fresh milk. **opposite page left** The sandstone stable exterior will eventually be tucked pointed using clay gathered from the creek bed on the property, **right** Baking and preserving the harvest, as well as knitting tea cosies, are the domain of Fiona's mother, Jude.



Hard Yakka

text: **Megan Norgate** photography: **Tamsin O'Neill**

Turning a degraded piece of farmland into a habitable, productive property is one hell of a project. Ex bar owner and globetrotter Fiona Craig took it on and hasn't looked back.





A sunny terrace in front of the restored sandstone stable makes a perfect spot for lunch breaks and growing herbs. **opposite page top left** The remainder of last year's garlic crop, chosen for its high value and early harvest date so that it does not use water over the driest months of the year. **right** Fiona and her mother Jude in the market garden that overlooks the Yandoit hills and surrounding sandstone buildings. **bottom left** En-route to the garlic crop Fiona and Lola check out a honeybee hive in prime position under a huge yellowbox tree.

In 2011 Fiona Craig spent a single weekend looking at land for sale in central Victoria. By Sunday she had bought 21 hectares of degraded farmland in the Yandoit hills, along with its derelict 180-year-old dairy and stable. Prior to this Fiona had lived in Tokyo, owned a popular bar in Melbourne and managed private luxury boats in Europe. By the end of this she had seen enough waste and decadence for a lifetime and her appetite for wider horizons could no longer be satisfied in the city.

A walk through the landscape of the Yandoit property reveals the appeal. Tussocky hills and sandstone ridges are punctuated by wide green flats and stands of gum trees. On the day we visit, we follow a meandering brown creek and the air is warm, heady and buzzing with the frenzied hum of bees engulfing an ancient yellow box tree. Fiona says, "This was the last place I looked at, and the stone buildings were so beautiful and the hills so appealing ... I fell in love with the area."

Fiona spent the first year on the property living in a tent. She recalls her daily struggle to bathe herself before commuting to work, using buckets of freezing water. As winter approached her new neighbours intervened by forcing her to move into a nearby house to withstand the coldest months.

Every available moment for the last three years has been spent creating a viable and habitable farm. The ruined buildings were a metre deep with cow manure and petrified wildlife carcasses. These were shovelled out by hand, then wheel-barrowed down the hill to start the garden beds. Building a makeshift kitchen and bathroom (known as the "bitchen") as well as a composting toilet was essential. Many friends and neighbours contributed days and weeks to restore the buildings, and Fiona's mother Jude now lives with her on the property, working tirelessly by her side.

Local fires were enough to convince Fiona to create one shelter that would not burn like kindling, and the sandstone ruin was voluntarily restored to satisfy BAL 40 (Bushfire Attack Level 40 is the second-highest ranking up to 40km²). Into this modest, monolithically walled studio went her collected furniture, books and Japanese textiles to create a pocket of surprising civility and a welcome respite from the seasonal extremes. The half-buried, heavy mass construction maintains a pleasant ambient temperature. Shoes are removed at the door and ex-nurse Jude takes a fastidious approach to sweeping and dishwashing in order to keep the omnipresent dust and flies at bay. Inside, a warm fire, cool stone floor or glowing lamp take on a heightened sense of comfort, set against the surrounding wind, heat and glare. -



Fiona is farming with permaculture methods, using available resources, diverse crops, animal systems and no chemicals. A market garden greets you at the entrance. Stone fruit, apple and pear orchards are about to bear their first fruit. 150 olive trees grow on contours on a western slope and garlic crops flourish down on the creek flats. The farming projects are mostly collaborations with other locals or enthusiastic city friends. Four neighbours own the resident Jersey cows, Lola and Svetlana, and take turns to milk them daily. A neighbouring farmer will monitor Lola's suspected pregnancy in a complex barter arrangement that involves garlic, grappa and baking.

Fiona has discovered the local community is a greater source of knowledge than any of the books that line her shelves. "I really enjoy feeling my knowledge and skill base broaden really slowly ... after 20 years here I will probably know a little bit," she wryly admits.

Recently a "house" has arrived, a 1960s classroom purchased in Kyneton. Still perched as if not totally committed to its new hillside location, it is currently being renovated. When complete, Fiona and Jude will have some creature comforts for the first time in three years, including a worm farm, septic tank and solar hot water. Future plans include pigs, goats and a wood lot. This year she and her partner, chef Michael, will begin running a bed-and-breakfast on the property with distinctly local offerings including a breakfast of the produce from their two properties: fruit, honey, yoghurt, bacon and eggs. Market stalls are also on the cards, selling the organic garlic and gourmet pork buns.

Fiona quickly dismisses our suggestion that her workload could be sometimes overwhelming: "I think there is no way in the world you would come out here and buy a property if you were of the disposition to be a bit lazy – you do it because there is an endless amount of wonderful things to do." 🐾

yandaitcreekbleat.com



opposite page top The old dairy now stores neatly organized stacks of salvaged materials and equipment collected at local farm sales and auction yards **bottom** Lola – both the dog and the cow are called Lola – is a well loved companion, despite her predilection for chasing utes and picking fights with kangaroos.