

The Sunday Telegraph
Edition TSUN 14 MAR 2010, Page 008
Dream country to get the wheels churning --- Cheese: Bodalla
By Lance Richardson

A tiny village is going back to its dairy roots, writes Lance Richardson

CHEESE gives you dreams, say those oft-quoted old wives.

This hasn't stopped anyone taking another slice of brie though. If consumption levels of cheddar and its various cousins are any indication, Australia is a nation of dreamers.

Surely there is none bigger than Sandra McCuaig, who ate so much cheese her dreams came to encompass an entire town.

"Sometimes I wake up and I think, this is so mad," she laughs, reflecting on the blueprints for an artisan cheese factory, which have just been approved for construction in the tiny village of Bodalla.

But her daughter Jane is just as involved, and the "madness" seems to be contagious, spreading through the village one project at a time.

Bodalla is an oddity. Nestled in the picturesque folds of south coast NSW, it exists on the periphery of regular Australian history.

Towns generally evolved along fairly homogenous lines as Australia ambled towards Federation.

Not so Bodalla, which developed through the late 1800s as the fanciful personal project of Englishman Thomas Sutcliffe Mort.

Rich and visionary, Mort did things his way. "Give feudalism a second shot" might have been his slogan he owned all the farms and cheese factories in the area, built the churches, drained the swamps and cleared the beef cattle.

"There's no streetlighting in Bodalla," Jane says, "because whenever public money was allocated to towns the government thought, well, that's sorted."

Neither are there bus stops, rubbish bins or public footpaths.

Sometimes Bodalla is left off the maps, even those put out by its own council. The result, is an "unspoilt little village that really doesn't look unlike it did in the 1860s", McCuaig says.

A personal challenge for Mort has become a personal challenge for her and her family. At an age when many people might be happy sitting back to graze, she regularly pilots a light plane from Sydney, circling the local runway twice to scare off grazing kangaroos.

The "private" town of Mort is an interesting story, but a return to feudal estates is not going to work now, even if Mort was spoken of after his death as the greatest benefactor the working classes in this country ever had. Nor is it the McCuaigs' intention. They see an opportunity for revitalisation, rallying the town and its people to restore Bodalla to its former glory.

It began with the bakery, its wood-fired oven made from the same granite as the pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was about to close down when Sandra and her husband bought it and recruited an artisan baker after extensive renovations.

Even more striking as one enters the town is The Dairy Shed, a pitched-roof weatherboard construction that trades in shakes and local beef burgers.

Their second project evokes a '50s diner, with quirky retro furniture and an impressive 1962 AMI jukebox.

A gaping fireplace attests to the loving attention lavished on every detail: each of its 10 tonnes of stones from the Tuross River was carefully chosen and fitted into place. The McCuaigs drew on every master craftsman in the area, right down to the cow-tail door handles, which required some fairly odd "research".

And then, of course, there's that giant slab of concrete next door.

At the centre of Mort's original estate were five cheese factories, producing an impressive line of wheels shipped to Sydney and Melbourne and famed for their quality. Mort even financed the first refrigerated ship to London, solidifying his reputation and that of Bodalla.

“What are people looking for?” McCuaig asks. “They're coming to town to look for cheese. It's one of the few intensive dairy areas left.”

High rainfall means the area remains incredibly productive, but the raw produce is shipped to Bega and beyond. Over the years, factory production waned and the last wheel was produced in the mid-1980s.

The concrete slab alongside the highway represents the culmination of some serious cheese-dreaming.

Next year is the town's 150th anniversary, a serendipitous coincidence: next year the McCuaigs open their artisan factory and put Bodalla back on the gourmet map, reclaiming a dormant heritage.

“Artisan cheese-making is incredibly manual,” Jane says. “You have to literally launch yourself into the cheese vat and pull the curd away from the whey.” It's an art, a volatile product. No button-pressing here.

All this talk of cheese sends her mother off dreaming about the past. Tastes have changed, she says. When a specialty cheese supplier opened in Bondi in the '70s people thought:

“What madness! Who would go there just to get their cheese?” Now people take light planes, and an artisan factory exudes an aroma enticing enough to mobilise an entire family and a town.

Caption: YESTERYEAR: Shops in the main street of Bodalla; the surrounding country is great for dairying.

Illus: Photo

Column: Escape / Travel

Section: FEATURES

Type: Feature