

EAT BAY LOVE

Once a haven for hippies, Byron Bay has been reborn as a foodie destination. Returning ex-resident **David Leser** embarks on a tasting tour more sinful than spiritual.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON LOUCAS

“YOU know, mate, this was always a shagging place,” Byron Bay’s 85-year-old historian Eric Wright told me from his weatherboard house behind Honeysuckle Hill. “There was more sex here than you could poke a stick at.”

We had that conversation 13 years ago when I was new to the area and Wright, a Norco butter factory worker in Byron Bay for 50 years, was not long for this world.

“Trains would come through here in the 1930s,” he continued, his face creased with memories, “and couples would head to the cape for their love sessions on the side of the hill. I took my wife, who was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper, up there for moonlit picnics. It was out of this world.”

Byron Bay is still “out of this world” but not just because this staggeringly beautiful stretch of NSW’s North Coast has always lent itself to romance. (There were 37 weddings on the weekend before I arrived!) Rather, it’s because this Aboriginal Dreaming and birthing place, which has long drawn lovers, surfers, hippies, musicians, writers, artists, filmmakers, alternative health therapists and a legion of middle-class refugees into its embrace, is now a pre-eminent destination for food – wonderful, local, organic, creative, life-affirming food.

Over the past nine months The Farm (11 Ewingsdale Road, Ewingsdale; thefarmbyronbay.com.au) – a traditional chicken-roosting, pig-fattening, orchard-growing working farm five kilometres from the centre of town – has been leading the charge with its food-from-the-source ethos, in combination with a gourmet restaurant (Three Blue Ducks), bakery, yoga studio and permaculture workshops. In its first six months an estimated 250,000 people flocked to The Farm.

Locals will tell you there’s nothing new about this reverence for the provenance of food. For more than 40 years, Byron Bay’s alternative lifestylers have been growing



Three Blue Ducks restaurant at The Farm takes paddock-to-plate dining to new levels



Chicken liver parfait with crunchy chicken skin at Three Blue Ducks; The Farm’s Bread Social bakery and happy, free-ranging chooks (below)

dilapidated chic of Rae’s on Wategos, as well as the region’s ever-faithful favourites The Roadhouse, St Elmo, Italian at the Pacific, Fig Tree and Harvest Café.

And all this in a place that people forget was once known for the clearing of rainforests, the sandmining of beaches, the slaughtering of cattle and the culling of whales, making it look like bloody murder on the high seas.

Now people come to marvel at these wonderful migratory creatures and to delight in this bountiful slice of restored nature bounded by a marine park to the east and nature reserves to the north and south. And everywhere, particularly in the lush surrounds of Byron Bay, there’s glorious fresh food, which, as your humble correspondent, I feel compelled to sample.

After a guided farm-to-plate tour of The Farm with Tom Lane – the grandson of Oroton fashion empire founder Boyd Lane – I sit down to enjoy a chemical-free, pasture-fed cheeseburger before checking in to The Byron at Byron Resort and Spa (77-97 Broken Head Road, Byron Bay; thebyronatbyron.com.au).

mangoes, macadamias, sweet potatoes, pumpkins and all things green. They’ve set up permaculture farms, farmers’ markets, wildlife corridors, worm-farm waste systems – all the back-to-nature-and-simplicity trends that would inspire late-20th-century Greens politics in Australia.

But up in the emerald hinterland and along the turquoise waters of the coast beyond Byron town, a new crop of restaurants and cafés has the visitor – or, in my case, the returning ex-resident – grappling with an overabundance of mouth-watering choices.

Names such as Fleet, Foam, Doma Cafe, 100 Mile Table and the soon-to-open Elements of Byron are now vying for eating and drinking pleasure with the still-glorious rainforest delights of The Restaurant at The Byron at Byron Resort and Spa and the





Emanuelle Altarui sells locally grown vine-ripened tomatoes from Coopers Shoot at New Brighton Farmers Markets (right)



Opened in December 2004, this gorgeous retreat five minutes' drive south of Byron is set in an 18-hectare rainforest of bangalow palms, coastal cypresses and paperbarks, one of which has been dubbed "the hugging tree". This is where Barry Humphries stays when he's not masquerading as Dame Edna Everage and where musicians Bob Dylan, David Gray and Katy Perry have chosen to luxuriate while on tour.

But I barely have time to embrace a tree or listen to the mating call of the whipbird before I'm called to dinner at Rae's on Wategos (6-8 Marine Parade, Byron Bay; raesonwategos.com), where the likes of Russell Crowe, Nicole Kidman and Keith Richards have enjoyed the hush and whisper of the sea from their bohemian-style penthouses overlooking Wategos Beach.

While Bill Withers serenades me through the sound system, I settle in for a meal of organic Pacific oysters and line-caught goldband snapper from the waters off Noosa Heads, fortified by Velvet & Willow Riesling from Clare Valley.

The next morning I'm taken on a Taste Byron Bay tour (tastebyronbay.com) by Terasa Davidson, who gave up her job in investment banking last year to follow her passion for food. "This is an amazing food-bowl region – the microclimate, the red soil and the farmers who believe in their products," she tells me.



FLIGHT PATH

00L

Qantas flies to the Gold Coast from Sydney and Melbourne, with connections from other Australian cities.
qantas.com

On a sun-kissed morning, our foodie tour takes us to the New Brighton Farmers Market (River Street, New Brighton; newbrightonfarmersmarket.org.au), about 20 kilometres north of Byron, where we're treated to a breakfast of local delights: cheeses from Nimbin Valley, Italian-style salamis from Salumi (the award-winning masters of cold cuts) and tomatoes from Coopers Shoot.

We head back to the Pacific Motorway and over to the old railway town of Billinudgel, where "Ilias the Greek" (4/18 Bonanza Drive, Billinudgel; iliasthegreek.com.au) greets us with a tahini halva, which he declares has a higher "love-per-gram" content than any of his other products. (Byron Bay is, after all, the "love capital" of Australia.)



By evening I'm back in Brunswick Heads – 18 kilometres north of Byron and surely one of the loveliest bric-à-brac-filled seaside villages on the North Coast – to have dinner at Fleet (2/16 The Terrace, Brunswick Heads; 02 6685 1363), an unprepossessing hole in the wall on the wrong side of the town centre.

Inside, however, everything is right, from the stylish décor and handcrafted bar stools, to co-owner and sommelier Astrid McCormack's warm welcome. Her business partner and chef Josh Lewis's impeccably prepared menu features locally sourced school prawns with Brazilian cherry and green pepper, yellowfin tuna with fermented peas and garum, and pigs' trotters with sweet onions and capers – all accompanied by a rotating cellar of Australian and international wines. I'm in gastronomic heaven but there's more to come and time waits for no wannabe gourmand.

The next morning I drive through the sap-green hills above Byron where my late friend Irina Baronova came to retire after a career as a White Russian ballerina dancing for the kings and queens of Europe. I drink in the memory of her diminutive frame as I arrive at my next port of call, the delightful tree-shaded Doma Cafe (3-6 Albert Street, Federal; 02 6688 4711), where Japanese-born managers Takayuki Kuramoto and Takashi Yaguchi have been showcasing their exquisite flavours for the past three years.

I'm soba-sated but over the next 48 hours I find time – and space in my expanding girth – to fit in a cool candlelit dinner and Strathisla whisky from the Scottish Highlands at The

Clarkes Beach (left); yellowfin tuna, fermented peas and pilchard garum at Fleet (below left)

After some mandatory plate-smashing and appalling Greek dancing by your overfed correspondent, we follow the breeze coming off the Brunswick River to Noel Baggaley's oyster farm, where, among the black shags and pied oystercatchers, we are introduced to the fine art of oyster farming.

There are four to five million oysters growing here at any given time so when Baggaley suggests I help myself to as many as I want, I do just that. They are salty, delicious and, yes, never mind that oysters wouldn't normally go well after halva – this is a food festival for one! You can also feast on Baggaley's oysters and other local delights at Byron Farmers' Market (byronfarmersmarket.com.au) and Mullumbimby Farmers' Market (mullumbimbyfarmersmarket.org.au).



Quisine.

Roadhouse (6/142 Bangalow Road, Byron Bay; 0403 355 498); a herb omelette roll and coffee the next morning at my old favourite The Top Shop (65 Carlyle Street, Byron Bay; 02 6685 6495); and dinner at Foam (41 Pacific Parade, Lennox Head; foamlennox.com), 20 minutes' drive south of Byron.

Foam manager Marcus Corcoran and head chef Chris Harrington have done wonders for Lennox Head – and the region generally – with their superb menu and selection of wines. (If you must know, I have sashimi, squid-ink cracker and wasabi peas followed by baked mahi mahi with saffron, fregola, fennel and serrano ham, cleansed with a handcrafted pinot grigio from the Alto Adige province of north-eastern Italy.)

So, yes, the region might have always been a place for “shagging”, as Eric Wright put it so indelicately. But as English writer Virginia Woolf also observed: “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.”

In Byron Bay, I'm happy to confirm, you can do it all. ●



Travel Insider

Explore all of Byron Bay with our City Guide.
Go to travelinsider.qantas.com.au.

Natural elements There's a new resort in Byron Bay that's inspired by Mother Nature.



Elements of Byron's eco-chic Beachside Villa

If Byron Bay didn't already have enough treasures, natural and man-made, to provide relief for body and soul, Elements of Byron (144 Bayshore Drive, Byron Bay; elementsofbyron.com.au) will take it to a new level.

Opening in February, this \$100-million resort just 2.5km north of the town centre sits on 22 hectares of wetlands, dunes, rainforest and eucalypts and fronts onto a beach with uninterrupted views to Cape Byron Lighthouse.

Inspired by nature, the resort has five hectares of endangered rainforest and interpretive nature trails and is adjacent to a migratory bird sanctuary.

Dedicated to connecting guests with Byron's unique

ecology and philosophy, owners Peggy and Brian Flannery have spared nothing in their holistic approach to creating a resort that blends nature's design with human ingenuity.

The 103 luxurious villas are energy-efficient havens located within the four ecosystems. The pool/terrace area has a lagoon-style infinity pool with day beds, sun lounges, hanging lounges, a cocktail bar, a café and a sunken fire pit. There's also a conference wing for up to 450 people.

It's a barefoot amble to the day spa and gym and executive chef Justin Dingle-Garciyya's Mixed Dozen restaurant, an ingenious culinary offering pairing 12 chefs with 12 local growers and 12 winemakers for 12 months.