

The squire of Rocky Cape

FARMER JOHN AITKEN HAS TWO CATTLE PROPERTIES THAT STRADDLE HIS LOCAL WATERING HOLE, THE ROCKY CAPE TAVERN IN NORTH-WESTERN TASMANIA, SO WHEN THE PUB LOOKED LIKE CLOSING HE BOUGHT IT.

STORY + PHOTOS ANDREW BAIN

ON THE LOW hilltops at Montumana in north-western Tasmania, the world's cleanest air is hurrying through the long grass, smoothing it like velvet. Over the backs of his grazing cattle, John Aitken points to the myriad landmarks of the view that's laid out from the green heights of his farm: sea and mountains, the curious Nut rock formation by the town of Stanley, the tangled edges of Australia's largest temperate rainforest and here, a pocket of blood-red volcanic soil that sustains one of the country's finest farming regions.

"I think it's a unique place in Australia," the beef farmer says over the rush of the Roaring Forties wind. "It might not be God's country, as in perfect every month, but it's nothing like the rest of Australia. We get drought here but it might only last for three months."

About the only thing that's missing in the view is the Rocky Cape Tavern, with the highway pub that is the newest addition to John's herd, hidden away in folds of land below. After more than 30 years of farming in the Circular Head district, John bought the struggling pub last December – his first business venture outside of farming – saving it as much for himself as for the passing flow of drinkers and diners.

"We looked like losing our drinking hole and somewhere to eat," he says. "No-one was wanting it and it was rundown. I've been coming here for 10, 12 years and I thought, 'If I get it right it'll be a super fund working for me'."

As on his land, John has proven quite unique in the venture. In this simple pub at the edge of the small Rocky Cape National Park, patrons can now dine on the same quality beef enjoyed by diners in the finest restaurants. Meat served at the Rocky Cape Tavern is premium-quality Cape Grim Beef from local producer Greenham Tasmania.

But at the Rocky Cape Tavern the beef comes with a far more personal connection. From John's two properties – 405 hectares that sit suitably either side of the pub – around 400 to 500 fat cattle are sent to Greenham for Cape Grim Beef each year. Order a steak at the Rocky Cape Tavern and there's a chance it might have come from the publican's own farm. For John, who spent his young working years travelling and working on Western Australia's oil rigs and Queensland's sugar mills, copper mines and cotton fields, it means waking to his cattle each morning and potentially feeding them to patrons in the evening.

"I'd be one of the few people selling beasts, then buying the meat back and reselling it," John says. "I can't guarantee it's my beef that comes here but some days it would be. It would be a real good sales pitch if I knew that it was my beef coming in. Maybe one day when we get big enough we can do that."

For now, John is content with a wider boast: "This might be parochial, but the meat you get here is the best in Australia ... from your local pub. We're not a restaurant but the tastes will be as nice. And it won't be presented with a big plate and a little bit of food in the middle. You'll get a full meal."

Visit the area and the reasons for the beef's quality seem self-evident. The volcanic soil is almost passionately red and alive with possibility, receiving more than 150 days of rain in an average year, while the air at Cape Grim, about 70 kilometres west, has been declared by the CSIRO as the cleanest in the world, blowing in across thousands of kilometres of empty Southern Ocean.

Tavern cook Kylie Hoare, who has worked in kitchens in nearby Wynyard, Somerset and her hometown of Yolla, says the quality of Cape Grim Beef means she's never had it so good.

"It is beautiful meat," she says. "From what I used to work with to what I work with now, it's altogether different. It's just beautiful meat to cut and to cook, and it's never tough."

John and wife Annette's ambitions for the Rocky Cape Tavern don't stop at the menu. Plans include merging the beer garden with the pub's putt-putt golf course and playground to make an open, family-friendly space. Live music may also return to the pub that hosted the likes of Jimmy Barnes, Goanna, John Farnham and country guitarist Stuart French in the early years after its opening in 1983, six years after John and Annette moved into the district to lease a dairy farm at Christmas Hills.

"It was the biggest outdoor music function centre in the state in its time," John says. "I think Stuart French might even come back to play. I know him and he said he'd come, he's just got to fit it in. I want to run this pub my way. It might seem naive, coming from a farm and deciding how you want a pub run, but that's me. I reckon I've drunk enough from the other side of the bar to know how it should be run. I think I've got a feel for it and if I'm wrong, so be it. It's my expense."

It's the sort of standard and exactness that John also demands of the tavern's kitchen. If the food doesn't meet this beef farmer's very particular tastes, it's unlikely to make it to the dining room. ▶



CLOCKWISE; John Aitken on his cattle property at Montumana in north-western Tasmania; inside his tidy Rocky Cape Tavern; Annette and John Aitken.



CHRISTMAS DINNER INSPIRED BY THE ROCKY CAPE TAVERN

ENTREE

Ocean-running trout with mango and strawberry salsa trout

Quantity of ocean-running trout to suit, cut into entrée-size portions. Brush both sides with olive oil. Season trout on both sides with salt and pepper. Place fish on grill and cook for approx. three minutes on top and bottom, turn 45 degrees and cook each side for 1–2 mins until cooked through. Remove from grill and serve on crisp lettuce leaf with salsa spooned on top.

Salsa:

- 1 cup small diced mango
- 1 cup small diced strawberries
- ½ cup small diced red onion
- ½ cup small diced green capsicum
- 2 tablespoons freshly chopped mint leaves
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Mix ingredients together, cover with plastic wrap and sit for 20 mins before serving.

MAIN

Roast beef with horseradish seasoning

- 2.5kg roasting beef
- 1 ½ cups water
- ½ cup cream
- 1 tablespoon cornflour
- 1 tablespoon brandy
- 2 tablespoons port
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 beef stock cube

Seasoning:

- 90g butter
- 2 bacon rashers
- 1 medium finely diced onion
- 1.5 tablespoons horseradish relish
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 1 egg
- 2 cups stale breadcrumbs

Make pocket in meat for seasoning. Spoon seasoning into meat and secure opening with skewers. Place roast in baking dish. Bake uncovered in hot oven for 20 mins, turning once. Reduce heat to moderate; bake until meat is cooked as desired.

Remove roast from dish, stand, covered, for 10 mins. Drain and discard all but two tablespoons of fat from dish. Add water, cream and blended remaining ingredients to dish. Cook, stirring until sauce boils and thickens slightly.

Seasoning:

Melt butter in small pan; add bacon and onion; cook, stirring until onion is soft. Cool. Combine bacon mixture with remaining ingredients in medium size bowl. Mix well.

DESSERT

Stained glass Christmas cake

- ½ cup dry-roasted almonds
- ¾ cup brazil nuts
- 1 cup roasted macadamia nuts
- 1 cup raisins
- 1 ½ cups pitted dates, halved
- 400 grams mixed glace fruit: pineapple rings, whole apricots and whole figs.
- 200 grams mixed colour glace cherries
- ½ plain flour
- ¼ cup self-raising flour
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup firmly packed brown sugar
- ½ cup brandy
- 2 teaspoons finely grated orange rind
- ½ cup apricot jam

Heat oven to 150 degrees Celsius, line 20cm ring tin with paper on base and extending up side to make 6cm collar above rim. Coarsely chop half of glace fruit, cherries, nuts, raisins and dates. Place in large bowl and stir to combine. Sift flours and cinnamon and stir ¼ cup into fruit mixture. Beat eggs, sugar, 2 tablespoons brandy and orange rind together until light. Add remaining flour and stir to combine; fold this through fruit mixture and spoon into prepared tin. Cut remaining pineapple, apricots and figs into quarters. Press along with other remaining fruits and nuts (gently) onto top of cake. Place paper bag on top of collar and bake 1 ½ hours or until inserted skewer comes out clean. Place apricot jam and remaining brandy in small saucepan and simmer for three minutes, sieve and brush over cake. Cut into slices and serve with large dollop of King Island cream. Makes great centrepiece on Christmas table.



Rocky Cape Tavern cook Kylie Hoare with a selection of served delicacies.

"I'm a very fussy person with food," he says. "I've got real sensitive taste buds. I'd back my judgment that if I like it, most people will. If a meat's tough and chewy, or if it's not prepared properly, I don't expect anyone else to eat it. If the vegetables aren't right, I can pick that up probably quicker than most people. I got growled at [in the kitchen] for a fair while but now they're starting to see that maybe I'm right."

At day's end, with the cattle left behind and the beef still ahead, John relaxes with a drink in the tavern. "The pub is a real challenge and I like it, but you can only do so much to make it happen," he says. "You're relying on people to come in and like you and like your beer. On the farm you can make it happen, you can control everything other than the weather. The farm and the pub are both tough, in different ways."

Christmas this year is extra special for the Aitkens following the birth their first grandchild Lucas in October to daughter, Natalie, who lives in Launceston. It's an event that has prompted them to close the pub on Christmas Day, allowing them to spend time with their newly expanded family, enjoying the likes of Annette's ocean-running trout and Christmas cake.

It will be a far cry from last year, when the tavern hosted around 30 Christmas lunch guests just three weeks after John and Annette took it over, turning the day into something of a blur for the pub's new owners. "We worked long hours but we got through," John says. "This Christmas is going to be better organised for us. I might have time to understand what day it is."

There's time also for John to appreciate the small slice of the Aussie dream that has fallen his way. "I've got the best of all worlds – the farm, a home on the beach ... and I own a pub."

ROCKY CAPE TAVERN

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