# From country to city and back again

Rural kids who left for Sydney in search of greener pastures have returned to their hometown of Griffith in New South Wales to embrace their heritage and run businesses that make the most of what the region has to offer

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Yarran Wines' vineyard in Yenda is one of the stops in Bella Vita Tours


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It's a global trend slowly taking hold — young urbanites happily giving up lucrative jobs in the big city in pursuit of something more fulfilling in quieter, less frenetic hometowns. In Japan, thirtysomethings are saying "Sayonara, Tokyo!" to work on boutique farms in the northern island of Hokkaido. In the Philippines, young families are retreating to the provinces, away from the grinding traffic and dizzying pace of Metro Manila, to lead less stressful lives that don't include soul-crushing commutes to and from the office. Many of them set up small to medium businesses — a restaurant, a charming boutique, a chocolatier — that help liven up what would otherwise be sleepy communities.

The story repeats itself in Australia, where those who grow up in rural towns leave as soon as they get the chance, determined never to return. In New South Wales, Sydney is the destination of choice for many. The job opportunities and entertainment options — beaches, restaurants, bars and nightclubs — prove irresistible to young people.

For many reasons, however, there are some who turn their backs on all that and return to their rural roots, known in the local informal lexicon as "boomerangs". Here we meet three boomerangs who are injecting a youthful energy to their hometown of Griffith, located in a major agricultural region known as Australia's food bowl.

## Shining the spotlight on local produce

Like many teenagers, Luke Piccolo wasn't sure what job he wanted to pursue once he finished school, but after starting a cooking apprenticeship at his parents' café, Luke knew he wanted a career in food.

Luke moved to Sydney in 2011 where he worked as a chef in various fine dining establishments for three years before traveling to Italy and cooking in Michelin-starred restaurants. He finally returned to Griffith in 2015 with a plan to open a new restaurant that would showcase the area's abundant produce. Griffith is an agricultural powerhouse accounting for 75% of wine grapes grown in New South Wales; 90% of the country's rice and 95% of its prunes. The town, 500km away from Sydney, is also Australia's largest citrus producing area.

"There's not many places in the world that have the diversity we enjoy in Griffith — we have nuts, grains, fruit, vegetables — there's almost no produce that I can't get my hands on locally," says Luke. "I know people pack up and leave Griffith because we are quite isolated and there's no beach. But that makes us focus on food and I love that."

> "There's not many places in the world that have the diversity of produce we enjoy in Griffith"

Luke opened Limone in late 2015. He prepares his dishes using ingredients sourced from producers in the area, as well as his family's eight-hectare farm just outside Griffith. As Luke depends on seasonal produce, the menu changes throughout the year. Some of the dishes he serves: lightly grilled spring asparagus paired with the last of winter's black truffle; apple and béarnaise sauce; spatchcock (poultry that has been prepared for roasting by removing the backbone) with smoked paprika; char-grilled quail with pancetta and spring onion; and a dessert with quandong (a wild peach), strawberry and yogurt.

Limone is making many patrons happy — it's ranked second among 39 Griffith restaurants on TripAdvisor. But Luke wants to achieve more. "I want people to come to Limone and have an amazing meal, but also know the story behind the food," he says. Luke's Italian partner Fabiola Valtolina, who works the front of house, introduces the provenance of the dishes with such knowledge and gusto that you feel as if you know the producers personally.

Luke is also doing his part in inspiring the next generation of chefs in Griffith. "I am currently training two apprentices," he shares. "I'm hoping to get to a point where people will travel to Griffith to work for us. That would be amazing."

**Limone**
482 Banna Ave, Griffith
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*limone.com.au*

**1** Early diners at Limone **2** This dessert from Limone features quandong, a native bush food **3** Chef Luke Piccolo of Limone **4** Fresh handmade pasta at Limone **5** Choose a drink from Limone's cocktail bar **6** Limone is housed in a building made of recycled materials





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Visit **waytogo.cebupacificair.com** for more adventures and journeys off the beaten path.

## Showing off the best in town

Seven years ago, Cassandra Smeeth was wandering through a farmers' market in Sydney when a thought struck her. "Growing up in Griffith I saw how food goes from paddock to plate, but my friends who grew up in Sydney had never seen that," she says. "I saw all the produce at the market and realized we have all of that and more in Griffith."

Cass was a marketing manager at a media and advertising agency for three and a half years in Sydney and, as such, clocked up crazy hours during the work week. She looked forward to the weekends, when she headed back to Griffith, sometimes with friends. "They were looking for the experiences I always took for granted growing up." Like many with Italian heritage in Griffith, Cass spent a lot of time in the kitchen growing up. She made salami, preserved olives and prepared *sugo* (a tomato-based pasta sauce). She also picked oranges and collected eggs from the hens. "My friends would want to go and do these things," she says. "I would throw them a basket and tell them to go for it."

## WHILE YOU'RE IN THE AREA

Visit the **Junee Licorice and Chocolate Factory**, which holds the world record for the longest piece of licorice (612m). Watch as licorice is cooked, cooled, kneaded and cut into long black ropes. *45–61 Lord St, Junee; +61 2 6924 3574; greengroveorganics.com.au*

Sample cheeses at **Coolamon Cheese**. Cheesemaker Adam Papprill incorporates native ingredients into many cheeses, producing subtle but delicious flavors such as bush tomato, river mint, lemon myrtle and alpine pepper. *87 Cowabbie St, Coolamon; +61 2 6927 3757; coolamoncheese.com.au*

Since he was a child, **Hape Kiddle** has been a creator. The Griffith-based artist draws on nature as inspiration for his jewelry and timber creations, showcased at his own Bidgee Studio. *Cor Bridge Rd and Mackay Ave, Griffith; +61 4 0079 8153; IG: @hapekiddle*

**7** Cassandra Smeeth founded Bella Vita Tours in 2016 **8** Bella Vita Tours takes visitors to Yarran Wines in Yenda, near Griffith **9** This platter from Yarran Wines features homemade salami



**10** Cass guides visitors through the Yarran Wines vineyard

From Sydney, Cass moved to London with her British husband. After living there for five years, she had set up a small business selling Italian sweets at London markets and had the opportunity to do it full time, but the pull to return to her roots became too strong to ignore. "It took going away to Sydney and living abroad before I realized that life in Griffith is *la bella vita* (the good life)," says Cass. "I always knew I would return to Griffith," she adds. Her husband was keen to settle in Australia. Plus, she wanted to pursue the spark of an idea that had captured her attention those years ago at the Sydney farmers' market.

People outside the town were not recognizing the food and wine traditions of those in Griffith, so Cass set up Bella Vita Tours in January 2016. "It's a truly local experience where I take people around to sample wine, eat at local restaurants and cafés, and visit producers," she says. "We experience the best of what Griffith offers." Cass is a "solopreneur", so she takes bookings and runs the tours herself. Her clients are mainly Australians who live within three or four hours of Griffith. "I can see there is a growing awareness about what Griffith has to offer and I want to establish myself as a premium tour operator in the area," she says.

Cass admits that being a young female entrepreneur in a rural town can be tough. "Sometimes you come across old attitudes — that it has never been done before so it can't be done," she says. "But there's a whole bunch of young people doing cool, interesting stuff in the food and wine industry," she says. "We are making a change."

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## Toasting to the good life

True to his Italian heritage, Griffith native Nick Guglielmino grew up picking fruit and making wine, but his studies brought him to Sydney. "I went away to university to study construction management," shares Nick. After graduating in 2009, he worked as an administrator for a Sydney construction company. He stayed there for three years before moving on to work for a wine company in the city.

But in 2014, Nick had a compelling reason to return home for good. His family had a share in a winery in Hanwood, just 5km down the road from the Griffith town center. "A business partner left and I was tasked to take over as general manager. I thought I'd be mad to pass up an opportunity to build a new winery brand and showcase what we love doing," Nick says.

Nick and his family founded Mino

**11** Nick Guglielmino is the general manager of Mino & Co **12** Mino & Co's vineyard is located in the town of Hanwood, just outside Griffith **163** Mino & Co produces Signor Vino wines

"People are open to trying new wines. Providing them with New World styles of wines is my passion"







**14** Nick's beloved Vespa **15** A selection of Mino & Co's A Grower's Touch wines **16** Nick inspecting vines

& Co. It now crushes 2,000 tons of grapes annually to produce around 1.5 million liters of wine. Half of the wine produced is sold under the in-house "A Growers Touch" and "Signor Vino" labels, and the rest is sold to other companies. "I'm trying to make enough wine to share with the world!" declares Nick. "It's still early days — you have ups and downs and the pressure gets to you at times. But it has its magical moments too, like when you have an unbelievable vintage where the fruit is awesome."

Nick is particularly proud of Mino & Co winning a gold medal for their A Growers Touch Botrytis Semillon (a sweet, dessert-style wine) at the 2017 NSW Wine Awards. "The Riverina region around Griffith is known for its botrytis, so it was fantastic that ours was recognized," he says.

"It's an exciting time for us. Our winery is focusing on quality wines made from interesting [grape varieties]," he says. "People are open to trying new wines and I want to provide them New World styles of wine. I'm passionate about that." S

**Mino & Co**
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*minoandco.com.au*

## GETTING TO GRIFFITH

There are a number of routes you can take when driving to Griffith from Sydney. You can get there via Wagga Wagga, a vibrant town with an emerging food and wine scene, or via Yass, with its museums, galleries and antique stores. You can also catch a flight direct from Sydney, which will get you to Griffith in a little over an hour.

Cebu Pacific Air will start daily flights between Sydney and Manila this month.
**cebupacificair.com**