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TWEED TOURISM

STORY ANGLES FOR FOOD/WINE MEDIA

Nestled in the ancient caldera of Mt Warning, the Tweed region in northern NSW is emerging as one of Australia's most innovative and dynamic food producing areas.

Here you'll find producers who are transforming traditional Aussie favourites like rabbit and pork into commercial gourmet brands, and growers who are developing overseas markets for native 'bush tucker' fingerlimes and lemon myrtle.

Following the trail from the farmgate to the table, the region also now boasts a selection of award winning five-star restaurants featuring leading chefs who have made the sea change from the city to the coast where they have been inspired by the rich variety of produce to create their own style of Tweed cuisine.

The attached document includes background information on a selection of 'foodie' success stories from this fertile region. If you are interested in exploring any of these ideas further, we would be more than happy to assist by organising farm tours, interviews and/or restaurant visits, as well as making travel and accommodation arrangements for writers and photographers. Just let us know when you can come and who you would like to speak to ... and we'll do the rest.

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FROM THE FARMGATE ...

Banana Cabana Bush Tucker Garden

From his bush tucker garden at Chillingham, Gerard Buchanan has developed a thriving niche business, selling fingerlimes around Australia and overseas.

This native citrus fruit has been likened to caviar. The light lime pulp contains hundreds of tiny bubbles that burst when eaten, emitting a lemon/citrus flavour. Japanese chefs sprinkle the pulp on top of fruits. It is also used with seafood and even in gin and tonics.

Each fruit usually contains four or five seeds but Gerard has cultivated a seedless variety which has proved to be extremely popular in Australian Japanese restaurants in Melbourne and Sydney. He also exports to China and is currently speaking to Swiss chefs who are interested in receiving regular supplies.

Formerly a mango, banana and avocado grower, Gerard began cultivating his bush tucker garden eight years ago, starting out with 20 native fingerlime trees on his 350-acre property. Today, there are almost 1000 with each tree producing up to 12kgs of fruit per year.

He also grows a Japanese citrus known as yuzu fruit, kaffir limes and the very unusual looking 'Buddha's hands', imported from the foothills of the Himalayas.

In addition to his commercial supply operation, Gerard sells all of these unique fruits at the Banana Cabana roadside stall at Chillingham, west of Murwillumbah in the Tweed Valley.

Twyford's Lemon Myrtle Tea

This is a unique flavour of the Tweed, native to our region. Following the increased awareness of Australian native 'bush tucker' foods generated by the Sydney Olympics, Ian Twyford has developed lemon myrtle tea as a commercial certified organic crop, exporting his product to Malaysia, India and Europe from his base in Limpinwood. A horticulturist by trade, Ian also has an interesting background in the industry having spent some 15 years in Africa working on tea plantations.

Tropical Fruit World

Giant avocados, lucmos, jak fruits and soursops are just some of the unusual tropical fruits being harvested at Tropical Fruit World in Duranbah in Northern NSW.

In 1937 today's working farm and tourist attraction started as an experimental plot run by the Department of Agriculture to research tropical fruits. Now privately owned, the 65-hectare plantation grows more than 500 hundred varieties of rare and tropical fruits, including the chocolate pudding fruit, casimoras, carambolas, cactus fruit and babacos.

Owner Bob Brindsmead has also established a unique garden of medicinal plants gathered from all over the world and an Aboriginal bush tucker garden where visitors can sample the wild fruits, nuts and berries that made up the diet of indigenous tribes.

In addition to presenting Australia's – and possibly the world's – largest public display of tropical fruits, tourist facilities including the riverboat cruise, miniature railway, adventure playground and fauna park make this the world's healthiest theme park.

Border Range Fresh Farmed Rabbits

Based at Kyogle, Border Range are the largest commercial suppliers of rabbit meat in Australia. Partners Paul McVerry, Allan Clarke and Paul Bardwell combined their meat breeding (cattle) and meat retail expertise to launch the business six years ago, identifying a significant opportunity to supply this fast growing market.

Starting out with just 100 rabbits, Border Range Fresh Farmed Rabbit now has 15,000 rabbits at any one time and yet still can't keep up with the growing demand. Currently the company supplies to restaurants and five-star hotels around Australia, but enquiries are coming in thick and fast from Asia and other countries.

Higher in protein than any other meat, low in cholesterol and a good source of iron, zinc and vitamin B12, rabbit has been a popular meat overseas for generations and is a huge industry in Spain, Italy, France, Hungary, China and South America.

Border Range uses every part of the animal, producing fillets, smoked goods, gourmet sausages and pate on site. The skins are sold to Akubra for use in their famous hats and the blood and bone are used to make fertilizer.

Bangalow Sweet Pork

Going back to the old-fashioned basics has proved to be an award-winning strategy for Bangalow Sweet Pork^R producer, Jim Berting.

While most pork in Australia is produced using hormones and in-feed chemicals to reduce the volume of fat, Jim has found that using no artificial additives produces tastier and healthier meat.

Jim has been a pork producer for most of his working life. After studying animal nutrition and genetics at University and working with specialist farmers in Italy, he used natural selection and good nutrition techniques to develop a meatier and more succulent pig.

The fat is what gives pork its flavour, Jim says – and the industry experts obviously agree, having honoured Bangalow Sweet Pork with a swag of prestigious awards and wide recognition.

Bangalow Sweet Pork is now marketed from Cairns to Perth and everywhere in between, and recent enquiries from Dubai and Japan indicate that this home-grown specialty will soon be export bound.

Madura Tea

Australia's leading fine tea producer has launched a brand new product that is set to spark an Australian health trend.

Madura Tea in the Tweed Valley has developed 'white tea' by handpicking the buds and silver needles in the cold of early spring when fine white hairs cover the young tea

bud. At this time of the year, the bud contains a high concentration of stored winter nutrients and higher levels of tea antioxidants.

Madura Tea has come a long way since 1977 when the estate was established by a third generation tea planter from Sri Lanka on a run-down dairy farm at Clothiers Creek. Michael Grant-Cook had spent 20 years developing tea plantations in Papua New Guinea before migrating to Australia. Madura became the first to launch Green Tea in Australia and, although Michael has since retired, Madura is still the only major Australian-owned tea company.

The plantation has flourished in the fertile sub-tropical terrain of the Tweed and the estate is now a leading fine tea producer with products sold in major supermarkets all over the country. More than five million cups of Madura Tea are brewed each week throughout Australia. Madura also exports their teas to America and Canada, and is set to break into the China market.

Tea-taster, Michael Sales, would be an excellent interview subject. Hailing from India, Michael grew up on tea plantations and, like a winemaker, uses his superior tasting skills to ensure the right tea blends are mixed and produced. At the Tweed Valley plantation, you can also see every phase of the tea production process, from growing and harvesting through to rolling and drying.

Zeta's Coffee

Marc and Zeta Grealy planted the Tweed's first coffee crop in 1993. As a relatively small estate, they are able to hand-pick and sun-dry the beans, producing a single estate coffee that has won a swag of awards in the prestigious RAS Wine and Food Competition over the years (under their previous name, Carool Coffee Traders). Working in his 'spare time' as a Qantas pilot, Marc also offers an interesting insight into how he has managed to balance two very different careers while still enjoying the lifestyle offered by the Tweed region.

Ilnam Estate Wines

Carool winemaker, Mark Quinn, has stumped the experts by setting up a winery in the sub-tropical region of the Tweed.

Establishing Ilnam Estate Wines high up in the hills of Carool overlooking the Tweed/Coolangatta coastline in 1998, Mark found the rich soils of the Northern Rivers are particularly well-suited to red wine varieties. "Isn't it too hot to grow grapes here?" is the most often asked question but Mark says that the Carool climate actually doesn't get as hot as Victoria's summers.

To Mark's surprise, Ilnam Estate Wines is still the only winery in the Tweed. He and his family produce a boutique range of whites (Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc), reds (Shiraz, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon) and a semi-sweet Rose. Opening the winery in 1999, they won an award for their very first wine – the 2000 Dryland Merlot.

An interesting and unique aspect of a visit to Ilnam Estate is the opportunity to bottle your own wine, which can be arranged as part of a tour.

In addition to being quite an authority on wines, Mark is a real character who can chat on about anything. He's also known for his singing (the locals call him the Singing

Winemaker) and runs a great Sunday afternoon jam session at the winery featuring local musicians who have performed with the likes of George Benson, Art Garfunkel, Anne Murray and Dionne Warwick.

One of the highlight events each year at Ilnam is the 'community harvest', held in late February/early March, when neighbours from far and wide turn up to help bring in the crop.

Gourmet produce

A number of operators in the Tweed region produce boutique ranges of gourmet goodies that have become staple fare in local kitchens. These include the Iron Pot Food Company which produces Macadamia Pesto, Dukkah, Chai Tea, honey from the hive, Honey Nut and Seed Slice, and Gingerbread Biscuits; The Right Food Group, producing organic jams and pickles; Fisherman's Bounty – smoked trout and other seafood specialties; and Rodina – smoked salmon, turkey and chicken.

Fresh from the farm

Farmers Markets are a great way to sample local gourmet goodies and fresh produce while chatting to those responsible for it. The Banora Point and Pottsville markets, in particular, focus strongly on local fare. Alternatively, take a country drive through the hills and shop at roadside stalls right at the farm gate.

TO THE RIVERS ...

Tweed River Oysters

Tweed River oysters are renowned for their succulence and sweetness. Local cruise operator, Perfectour Pty Ltd, is now turning them into a tourist attraction in their own right by establishing an oyster bar on the banks of the Tweed River. In addition to seeing where the oysters are grown, you can shuck and slurp samples to your heart's content at this idyllic location which also features displays highlighting Perfectour's pearl farming operation.

Catch your own seafood banquet

Seafood just doesn't get any fresher than this. Catch-a-Crab cruises take you to the best mud crab hunting grounds where you can throw out the pots and catch your own lunch. To complete the seafood banquet, you can try your hand at yabby pumping, shuck oysters straight from the beds and drop a line for some freshwater fish.

Fly fishing for Australian Bass

Whilst fish are not produced for commercial consumption in the Tweed region, a river fishing story would be a great adjunct to fresh fish recipes (which I'm sure our local chefs would be happy to supply!)

Clarrie Hall Dam in the Tweed Valley is a favourite (and very beautiful!) location for bass fly fishing. It's stocked every year with over 20,000 fingerlings so the chances of getting a nibble are pretty good!

The Tweed River estuaries closer to the ocean are also happy hunting grounds for the evening meal, with local anglers regularly reeling in a feed of flathead, bream or a big Queensland muddie.

We could arrange for one of our local fishermen to take you out to some of his favourite spots on the dam, along the rainforest-shrouded banks of the river or out along the estuary banks.

TO THE SEA ...

Deep sea fishing charters

Deep sea fishing charters operate from the Tweed Marina, heading out towards the offshore reefs, islands, wrecks and other hot spots where you can reel in giant tuna, snapper, king fish and more. All fishing gear is provided, along with instruction, so whether you're an experienced angler or a rank beginner, you'll soon be an expert at trolling, lure, jigging, fly and live bait deep-sea fishing on an offshore charter.

TO THE TABLE ...

Steven Snow

Fins at Salt Seafood Restaurant

Byron Bay's renowned award-winning chef, Steven Snow, has partnered with restaurateur Wayne Slater for his third dining venue in northern NSW.

Steven's name is synonymous with success as the owner/chef of Fins at Byron - regarded as one of the most celebrated seafood restaurants in Australia. It was named Best Country Restaurant for three consecutive years by the Sydney Morning Herald's Good Food Guide, earning it the distinction of two chef hats and was also named Best Seafood Restaurant and Best Restaurant at this year's New South Wales Restaurant and Caterers Awards.

Steven opened Fins 13 years ago (initially at Brunswick Heads before moving to Byron eight years ago), but his cooking adventures have taken him to kitchens around the world, including Portugal, Indonesia, France, Vietnam, Vanuatu and Fiji, where he enjoyed a stint as guest chef at the exclusive Wakaya Club, a favourite haunt of Hollywood's top celebrities such as Nicole Kidman and Pierce Brosnan.

Steve's partner in the new Fins at Salt venture, Wayne Slater, has worked in some of Australia's leading five-star hotels and managed the acclaimed Sails Restaurant at Noosa before moving to Byron Bay as general manager of Rae's on Watego's.

Reflecting the signature style and finesse of its Byron counterpart, Fins at Salt specializes in contemporary Australian cuisine, including the freshest seafoods from the local area as well as innovative produce sourced from across northern NSW.

Greg Pieper
Executive Chef
Sandbar + Grill, Domain Casuarina Beach Resort

Greg Pieper started his career at the top and has never looked back.

Born and bred in Newcastle, he served his apprenticeship at the renowned Cellar Restaurant, a 'hatted' kitchen renowned for its rich regional cuisine. From that point onwards, he has been in demand at some of NSW's most acclaimed regional venues, including Darley's in the Blue Mountains, Rae's at Wattego and Olivos in Byron Bay.

Teaming up with Olivo's manager, Toby Bamford, he established Marine Restaurant and Bar on the Esplanade at Kingscliff as an award-winner and the dynamic duo are now repeating their success at Casuarina's Sandbar + Grill.

This beautifully designed restaurant offers Asian inspired dishes which showcase the Tweed's abundant seafood and locally grown produce.

The fact that it is now regarded as one of Australia's hottest foodie destinations is reflected in their success at last week's Gold Coast Magazine People's Choice Restaurant Awards where Sandbar + Grill was named Best Restaurant and Bar for the second year in a row. Making up the award hattrick, Greg also took out the prestigious Chef of the Year gong, while Lia Mason was named Apprentice of the Year.

Mavis' Kitchen & Cabins
At the base of Mt Warning

Mavis's Kitchen is one of our newest 'foodie experiences' in the Tweed Valley. Set in a gracious old Queenslander on 25 acres of farmland at the base of Mt Warning, the menu is focussed on the use of seasonal, local and organic produce.

Owners Peter Clarke and Charlie Ebell have established a biodynamic, organic kitchen garden on the grounds, set up by the region's finest garden designers and sculptors – Lana Tyacke and Rob Cottrell.

These gardens supply freshly harvested vegetables to the restaurant, supplemented by organic produce brought in daily by a local farmer. Consequently, the blackboard menu changes constantly to reflect what is in season but the emphasis is always on simple, home cooked, unpretentious dishes. (You can view a sample menu on their website.)

The building itself also has an interesting history: It was originally located on the Gold Coast where it was something of a landmark as the renowned Harley Street Brasserie in Labrador. When the land was sold, Peter and Charlie arranged for the old Queenslander to be moved lock, stock and barrel to their property in the Tweed Valley.

Mahsuri Thai
Salt Village

Another restaurant success story from Salt Village, this beautifully crafted restaurant puts the focus on Australian cuisine with Asian influences. Bangalow sweet pork, Border Range fresh farmed rabbits and locally caught cuttlefish are just some of the regional specialties that feature on their innovative menu.

Gelateria Vernazza Salt Village

Something a little different in the foodie line: The owners of this ice-cream shop hail from the seaside village of Vernazza on northern Italy's beautiful Cinque Terra. Using original recipes from the old country, they serve up a sensational selection of truly authentic Italian gelati.

Eat Street by the Sea

The Kingscliff Esplanade is lined with trendy cafes and eateries where shaded tables spill out across the pavements. Sample tapas, Indian fare, Thai, contemporary Australian cuisine and more at venues like Choux Box, Ibiza, Moorish and Kathmandu.

Ethnic bounty

And to finish with a flourish: How's this for a completely different food experience? Every Sunday, the Hare Krishna community of the Tweed Valley puts on a huge community banquet of traditional foods. This unique group of devotees moved to the valley many years ago to establish a 'true' Hare Krishna living experience. They share their bounty with anyone who cares to join them for a simple gold coin donation. Tours of their community are also available.