



Zucchini Custards with Tempura Blossoms on Beetroot Carpaccio (recipe, page 18)

Waddingtons at Kergunyah



PLACE OF PLENTY



WORDS CAROLINE PIZEY RECIPES JAN WADDINGTON PHOTOGRAPHY JAMIE DURRANT

I love the sign that hangs on the gate as you approach Waddingtons at Kergunyah: *Please close the gate otherwise the cattle will get onto the road.*

Practical, polite, it says everything about the priorities operating on this place — it's just not what you expect when you visit a restaurant.

Once the gate is shut behind you, your eye starts taking in the spreading hillside that rises towards where the restaurant sits amid its renowned garden and nursery. Cantilevered dams stagger intermittently across the slope, while paddocks merge with bush where the land steepens. Timber hugs the valley's ridgeline, huge trees left by long-gone axemen indicating the age of this place, while toffee-coloured kangaroo grass in the paddocks hints at the farming practices at play.

No ordinary restaurant. No ordinary farm.

Jan and Rod Waddington's 242-hectare property is a working farm, and has been since Jan's family, the Wallaces, settled it in 1868. The cattle you pass on the drive that winds through paddocks on its way up the hill are descendants of the Herefords mustered in the High Country by Jan's forebears until the 1920s, the same lot who in 1889 built Wallace's Hut at Falls Creek, now the oldest surviving cattlemen's hut.

Wallacedale has been farmed organically since Jan's father, Norman, was at the helm — hence the native pastures. He must have been an extraordinary man and you can see from where Jan gets her drive. With his cousin, Geoff, he produced the Wallace Aeration Plough in the early 1960s; he established keyline irrigation on Wallacedale later that decade (hence those dams), with a view to taking the system out across the heritage-listed Kiewa Valley; he held organic field days on the farm from the 1970s when only hippies were supposed to know about

such things, and he imported the first seaweed fertiliser into Australia.

Norman was 43 when Jan was born in the early 1950s, an important consideration when you realise that he and his family provided for her a very real link to the long-gone way of life of the pioneer. He passed on an acute awareness of landscape and the seasons: the need to tread gently, to respect the natural world, to farm instinctively. But his other legacy was his willingness to take a punt, to work hard — to evolve.

And evolving is what this pair does really well. At 18 and 19 they set off to travel the world, leaving Wallacedale behind them for two years while they headed for London, worked on organic farms, spent six months in Morocco, cooked on a kibbutz in Israel, and travelled extensively through the Middle East, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Burma and Nepal. Wherever they went, they scoured markets, befriended

stallholders and cooked. Jan travelled with a small stove, even when we had our 13-month-old daughter with us on our second trip (two years travelling from Tahiti to Central and South America) — she's just always cooked."

Looking to harness this passion, 30 years ago these two envisaged establishing a restaurant or perhaps a kitchen from which they could run cooking classes on the farm, down by the road to snare travellers and people living in Albany, just 20 minutes away. Instead, they built a house, had kids, travelled as a family, and life took them down a different road, which saw Rod develop his skills as a furniture maker and Jan build her other talent as a gardener. "Life is a shape former," Rod reflects. "I'm a keen surfer, and I like to think that life and running your own business is a bit like watching and waiting for the next wave."

Grabbing opportunities whenever they arise seems second nature to Jan and Rod — it's that ability to evolve. A windstorm in 1993 that brought down a lot of timber on Wallacedale might have been a headache for many; instead, they set up a mill in the bush for six months and from the devastation salvaged timber with which Rod built an impressive workshop for his furniture making. And around this charming, rustic building Jan started planning a garden from the bare bones of a farm paddock, using a handful of spectacular ancient red-bax trees as her backdrop. The garden — and her market-

based plant business, grew like Topsy — as they tend to when a vibrant green thumb is involved — and in 1995 they opened a nursery featuring drought- and frost-hardy plants, including many rare and unusual species.

In late 2002, just as things were ticking along — workshop, nursery, garden, farm — Jan and Rod decided to morph again, or at least to return to their plan pre-family. The workshop, they had decided, was the ideal site for a restaurant to complement the now-acclaimed garden and nursery. And so Waddingtons at Kergunyah was born.

Today, entering the garden from the 'carpark' (read 'paddock'), you pass through an ornate set of wrought-iron gates heavily hung with wisteria. Quirky garden sculptures peek out from nooks and crannies as you head towards the restaurant — a clutch of hens, a beautiful pod of glazed pears, a crazy wire onion, a vast water-filled vessel. Before you realise it you've walked past (or is that through?) the nursery — it nestles into the garden unobtrusively, a retail experience of the gentlest and most subtle kind. A treat.

The reworked workshop is now a rustic restaurant with masses of charm — a deck has been added to one end to take in garden and valley views, while the front of the original building has been pushed out to allow for a larger dining area and to let more of the outside in via picture windows. The roofline, unlined and with exposed beams, soars over an internal

hacienda behind which Rod manages the bar and coffee machine. A large Cater Lecuwin Clark painting, sculpted metal cowboy boots, elephant grass hats and baskets, Waddingtons produce, and a wonderful twisted mass of mega-zucchini ('mating sea slugs,' Rod guffs) add even more personality to this delightful light-filled restaurant.

Light is all important here — especially in the kitchen, which has windows overlooking the garden on two sides. "I like to see what's going on, even if it's to spot a brown snake on the path!," says Jan.

Jan shares the kitchen with her third-year apprentice, Natalie Watkins (a recent recipient of a Thiery Marx Career Development Award), but this is more than just a workplace. "It's now the trend for restaurants to have their own kitchen garden but we've always had them here in the country — we've had to!," laughs Jan, as she paints homemade quince jelly over lamb backstraps.

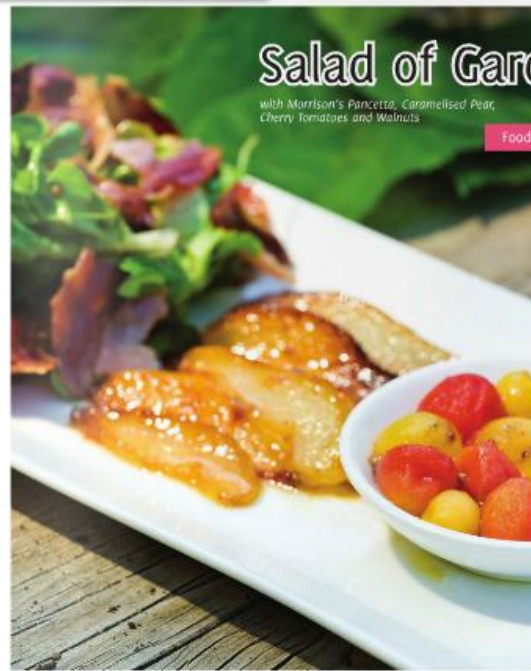
All produce used in the restaurant is either sourced on the farm or as locally as possible. A woman 'around the corner' supplies the eggs — "I can't make crème anglaise the 'right' colour," says Jan, "as the yolks are so yellow!" Goat comes from Myrtleford, saltbush lamb from Narandera (where it is farmed sustainably on saltbush plantations), walnuts from Gosport, smallgoods and other meats from Wodonga's Morrison Street Continental Butchers, whatever greens the garden can't keep up with from Willowbank Farm, and the bread is made onsite. And across the road is Sarah and Stephen Crooke's property, the home of Gundawring Finest Ice Cream — can't get much closer to the source than that!

Jan's years of cooking on the road while travelling the world have stood her in good stead as a chef in the country. The skills she honed using market produce in Morocco, South America, Israel and the like are those she employs today — use the best of what's available, now. Her food has an honesty about it — clear flavours and bright, stunning colours. The day I visit, turmeric goes into the tempura batter for just-picked zucchini flowers — "for the colour" — and spinach is added to a zucchini custard. "I didn't think it was quite green enough," admits Jan. Even the beetroot accompaniment is steeped in a vinaigrette just so the juices can bleed into the dressing. The resulting dish is a rich spread of Renaissance shades: deep-gold, claret-red, mint green. Filled with Milawa chèvre and herbs, the crisp-fried zucchini flowers provide a textural contrast to the delicate, creamy custard, while the citrus vinaigrette lifts the earthy beetroot. It is, simply, a triumph.

A salad of pancetta, caramelised pear, walnuts and tomatoes is a picture of burnished hues, and is deliciously salty, sweet, crunchy and slippery all at once. The fig tart, sporting fruit picked on the way down from the house that morning, is all crunch and sweetness, and more of that rich colouring. We eschew cutlery and munch in, sticky juices running down our hands and chins.

"On my way out, I ask Rod to guide me around the garden, where he tells me that the first permanent water to be found in the valley lies up in the hills behind us. It was this that attracted the first Wallaces back in the 1860s; before them, the site had been revered by local Aborigines, who named the area 'Kergunyah' or 'summer camp'. A place of plenty. Looking up to the hills, Rod points out how the ridges intersect so that from our viewpoint we appear to be riding on the back of a vast wedge-tailed eagle — "this was propitious to the local people, water and wedges in the same spot."

And it seems to have been propitious for the inhabitants of Wallacedale ever since, given their ability to respect and nurture their environment, and to evolve within it. "It's all about having a third eye," say Jan and Rod. A clarity of vision.



Salad of Garden Greens

with Morrison's Pancetta, Caramelised Pear, Cherry Tomatoes and Walnuts

Food Bites Autumn

Serves 6

12 thin slices Morrison Street Continental Butcher's pancetta
 ½ cup walnuts
 2 punnets mixed cherry tomatoes (including yellow and red pear-shaped varieties)
 Vinaigrette
 Vino cotto (optional)
 3 Bosc pears, peeled and thinly sliced
 Butter
 Soft brown sugar
 6 handfuls leafy greens (including red and green butter lettuce, wild rocket, baby spinach leaves, and purple and Greek basil)
 Salt
 Freshly ground black pepper

Method

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Cook the pancetta in an oiled baking dish until crisp, then allow to cool. Toast the walnuts for 10 minutes until golden, watching carefully so they don't burn, then set aside.

Halve the cherry tomatoes, then toss with a little vinaigrette or drizzle with vino cotto.

Melt a little butter in a frying pan, then add the sliced pear, sprinkle it with brown sugar and allow to caramelise on both sides — watch carefully so it doesn't burn.

Toss all the greens, then dress with vinaigrette and season, and arrange on individual plates. Break up 2 slices pancetta per person and scatter over the leaves with the walnuts, then arrange the pear and tomatoes on top.

Serves 6

2 sheets butter puff pastry
 12-15 Black Genoa figs
 Honey
 Gundawring Finest Vanilla Bean Ice Cream, to serve

Frangipane

100g unsalted butter (at room temperature)
 100g caster sugar
 3 free-range eggs
 40g plain flour
 125g ground almonds

Method

To make the frangipane, beat the butter and caster sugar in an electric mixer for 2 minutes, then slowly add the eggs until well combined. Sift the flour and ground almonds, then add to the butter mixture and beat for 1 minute. Refrigerate the frangipane overnight.

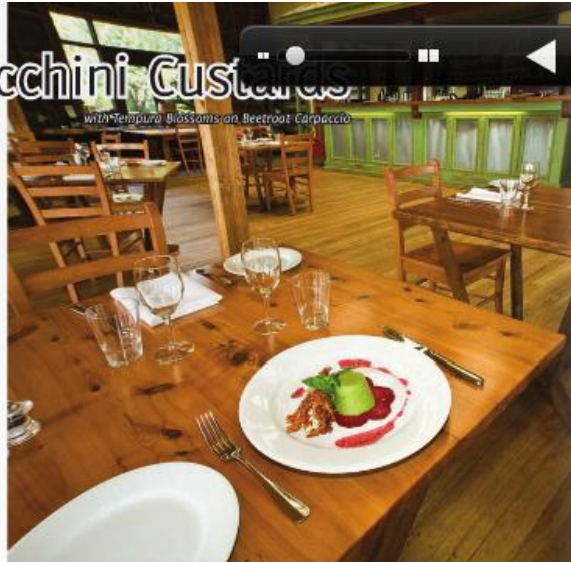
Next day, preheat the oven to 190°C. Stand 6x9 cm loose-bottomed tart tins on a baking tray. Line the tins with pastry. Spread a tablespoon of frangipane over the base of each pastry case, then slice the figs and arrange on top. Drizzle the figs with honey and bake for 15-20 minutes until the pastry is golden. Serve warm with Gundawring Finest Vanilla Bean Ice Cream.

Fig and Frangipane Tart



Zucchini Custards

with Tempura Blossoms on Beetroot Carpaccio



I have adapted this recipe from one that features in Alia Wolf-Tasker's book *Lake House* — don't be put off by its length, as it really is achievable! The custards can be made in advance and reheated gently in the microwave before serving, if desired. I like to keep a batch of the sifted dry tempura batter ingredients in the cupboard, ready to be mixed with soda water — just scoop it out as you need it, matching 2 parts dry ingredients to 3 parts soda water. The zucchini blossoms need to be prepared just before serving.

Serves 6

2-3 freshly picked beetroot, washed well, tops removed

Citrus vinaigrette

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Zest and juice of 1 orange
3 teaspoons red wine vinegar
3 teaspoons seeded mustard
Sea salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Zucchini custards

Zest of 1 orange
3 teaspoons freshly grated ginger
½ cup boiling water
40g butter
1 small onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
280g small zucchini, chopped
100ml thickened cream
1 loose cup baby spinach leaves
2 large free-range eggs
Sea salt
Freshly ground white pepper

Zucchini blossom filling

300g Milawa Chèvre
1 cup freshly chopped herbs (Italian parsley, thyme, basil etc.)
Freshly grated nutmeg
Freshly ground black pepper
6 just-picked tiny zucchini with blossoms attached, stamens removed

Tempura batter

1 cup plain flour
¼ cup cornflour
¼ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
Pinch of salt
Pinch of turmeric (optional)
Chilled soda or sparkling mineral water

Method

Make the citrus vinaigrette by mixing all ingredients. Slice beetroot very thinly (on a mandolin, if possible), then toss with vinaigrette and set aside.

To make the zucchini custards, steep the zest and ginger in the boiling water in a small bowl for 5 minutes, then drain well.

Melt butter in a frying pan, then sauté the onion and garlic over gentle heat until soft but not coloured. Add the zucchini, zest and ginger, then cook for a few minutes before adding the cream. Cook for a few minutes longer until the vegetables are just tender. Remove from the heat and allow to cool.

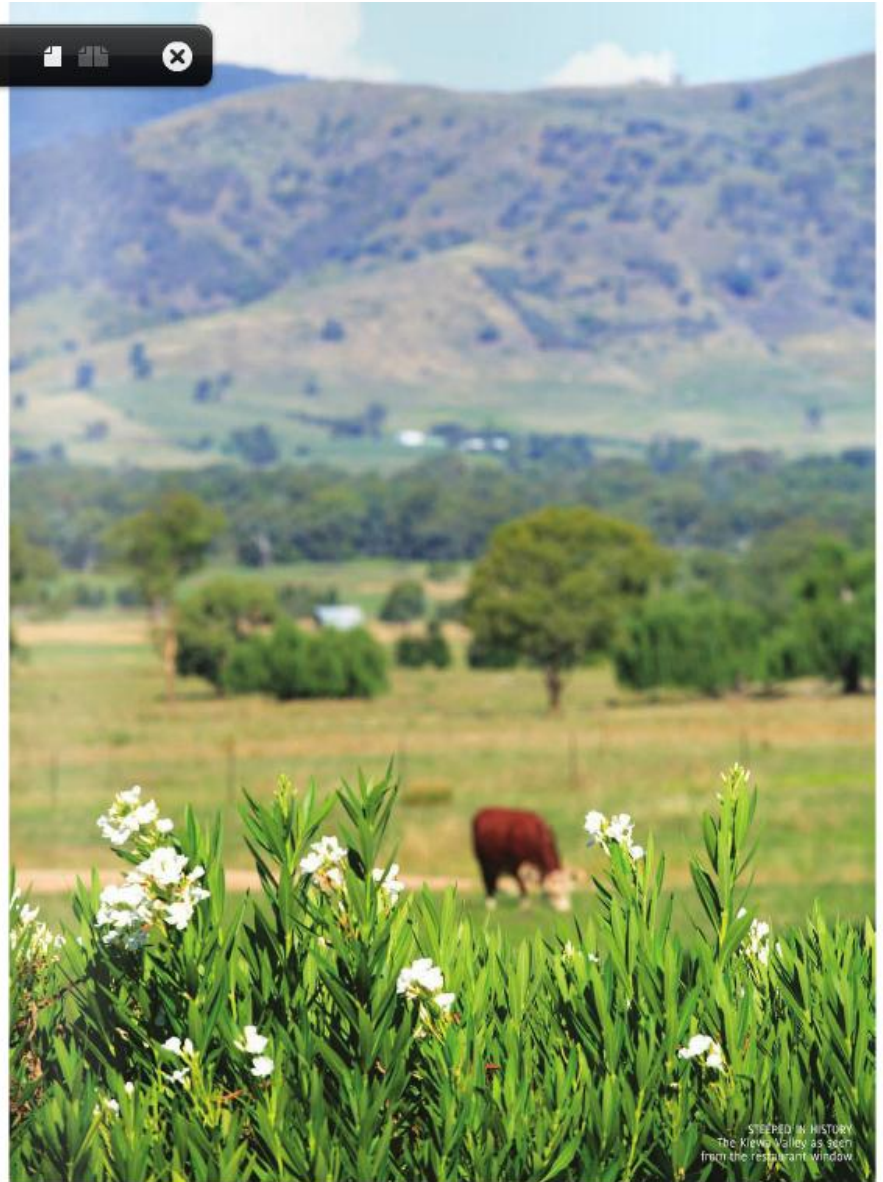
Preheat the oven to 170°C. Thoroughly grease 6 x 125 ml dariole moulds or small soufflé dishes. Add the spinach leaves to the cooled

zucchini mixture, then blend with the eggs, salt and pepper until smooth — taste for seasoning. Pour the custard mixture into the moulds until three-quarters full, then stand the moulds in a baking dish with higher sides than the moulds. Pour hot water into the baking dish to come halfway up the sides of the moulds. Cover with baking paper, then seal the whole dish with foil. Bake for 20-30 minutes or until the custards have risen and are firm. Remove from the oven and set aside. Reduce the oven temperature to low.

While the custards are cooking, prepare the zucchini blossoms. To make the filling, mix the chèvre and herbs, then season with nutmeg and pepper. Take a little of the filling and make an egg shape that will fit into a blossom, then fold the petals around the filling to enclose it. Repeat with the remaining cheese and blossoms.

Heat the oil in a deep-fryer or saucepan while you prepare the tempura batter. Sift the dry ingredients into a bowl, then quickly and briefly stir in enough soda water to make a thin, smooth batter (you'll need about 3 parts soda to 2 parts dry ingredients). Dip each filled blossom into the batter, shaking to remove any excess, then gently lower it into the hot oil and cook until golden all over. Don't overcrowd the pan or the oil will cool and the batter won't be crisp. Remove the cooked blossoms and drain on a kitchen paper-lined plate in a low oven while finishing the remainder.

To serve, arrange a circle of beetroot slices in the middle of each plate, reserving the citrus dressing. Turn a warm custard out onto each plate, sitting it in the centre of the beetroot. Place the zucchini blossoms on top or alongside the custards, then drizzle the reserved citrus vinaigrette around the plates and serve.



SHEPHERD IN HISTORY
The Kiewa Valley as seen
from the restaurant window