

LARA AND JAMIE McCALL LIKE to describe their spectacular Margaret River property as a genuine farmstay, and the scene on this sunny spring day is particularly authentic.

Jamie's keeping the grass down on a ride-on mower while his wife boils up bunny guts ripped from the rabbits their neighbour's kid shot the day before. There's an enormous, serrated industrial cutting machine on the back table. They've just "done" a cow. An invitation to "see the pigs" doesn't, on this occasion, mean a jolly turn around the farm to see the free-range animals but a short walk to the larder where a prosciutto-ed leg and other incredible-looking, handmade smallgoods are hanging. There's a big box of their organic Hass avocados by the door, the bumpy, less-pretty specimens deemed unsuitable for Margaret River's famous weekend market but with the same deep flavour that makes them coveted by folks all over town. In the office are boxes of their own Grazing Geese extra virgin olive oil, bottles of their own Three Boys zinfandel/primitivo wine, jars of their own rich honey and cakes of their own lemongrass soap — all organic and made on-site with produce grown by the industrious couple.

The McCalls, a stockbroker and journalist/sailor/pearl diver/furniture maker in another life, moved down to Margaret River like so many others before and since who have made a "lifestyle decision". "We came down 17 years ago," Lara recalls. "It was having kids that set it off. At that time I was in finance and when you became a mum you couldn't really go back to the workforce."

Jamie remembers casting an eye across their 450sqm suburban block and wondering where the kids would grow up. It was during an annual holiday at a family shack in Gracetown that they discussed leaving the big smoke behind. "We got to the end of our week's holiday and said 'Why are we going home?'"

The last 17 years have been crowded, with a third child, the fully functioning farm and popular boutique bungalows at Burnside keeping the very dynamic duo busy. They've established a deep connection with their own land but also with the natural environment the region is so famous for, along with an unwavering appreciation for the agriculture that has sustained the area for decades. They are proud, popular and active members of the extremely close-knit community: Lara's on the board of the farmers' market, Jamie is a volunteer firefighter. They surf and paddleboard, swim and walk. They never tire of the beauty around them. Ask them what they miss about Perth and they answer promptly and in unison: "Nothing at all."

Burnside Organic Farm was born when city-fresh Jamie and Lara decided to "put in a whole lot of crops" back in the late 90s. "We knew we wanted a farming property but back then there wasn't a whole lot of planning going on, we were making it up as we were going along," Jamie says with a laugh. "But it didn't faze us," Lara adds. "We had this confidence to do it because Jamie's dad had had a little farm out of Perth and always had cattle and Jamie had kept chickens, and my grandmother's Polish and I'd always seen her grow things and have chickens and it was just like, that's what you do, and so that's what we did." Jamie recalls planting the olive trees while their youngest, Dan, was in a pram. "He's 14 now."



Lara says from there the family embarked on their "food journey", which involved a very important stop at the organic station. When their vines were being attacked by beetles, Jamie received advice to spray pesticide. "Jamie looked it up on the net and went 'there's no way I'd put that on our property and let our kids eat anything that's been on'," Lara remembers. "So from that point on we decided we'd be certified organic."

Jamie denies organic is more difficult. "A lot of people baulk at organics because they're farming conventionally and they're scared to give away those things they've been using. We didn't have to do that because we never started using them in the first place. We found solutions without being too stressed about it because we weren't trying to replace one system with another, we just evolved a system from the start."

Instead, they try to let nature take its course. "People will see one weevil and think 'I'd better spray for weevils' but the fact is there's a balance of life in the vineyard and if there's a couple of weevils there will be a few predators and they keep each other in check."

The McCalls also grow capers, which they hand pick, and their feathered friends lay biodynamic eggs. Save for the odd purchase of flour or pasta, the family is self-sufficient. "As the kids got a little bit older and we were right on that food journey and food was becoming so important to us we decided to really put the effort into being self-sufficient, so now we pretty much are. Vegies, fruit and meat, those three things we never buy."

Jamie says they never set out to do it that way. "It was a real evolution. We'd be sitting around the dinner table and go: 'Hey look, almost everything here is ours.' We thought we're almost not buying anything, why do we buy anything at all? The real adjustment is to realise you don't have to have tomatoes in winter and you don't need to eat fruit every day of your life." Although, Lara points out with a guilty laugh, she did buy a few bananas for the kids.





Guests in the bungalows, including many expats living in Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia desperate for an Aussie experience, love immersing themselves in the farm environment. “We say: ‘This is our life, this is what we do, there’s nothing pretend.’ Feeding the chickens is because we have them for eggs. We keep pigs because they’re our food source. People can walk around the farm and see everything. With the accommodation and the wine, the olive oil, the capers, the honey, guests love having that interaction.”

They are completely bypassing the city for the place Lara calls “Perth’s playground”. “Some just come because it’s quiet and we’ve got wood fires and they can hide away in the chalets and have a peaceful time but we’re getting more people who are interested in food and organics and that side of it, too.”

While today is the second Gourmet Escape, Jamie and Lara like to think every weekend is a gourmet experience. “People used to make the assumption with Margaret River that because it was producing wine it was also producing food, and it wasn’t, really,” Jamie says. “The myth was running well ahead of the reality and the restaurants would actually struggle to find local produce — there weren’t that many people doing it because the economics of producing food are pretty grim. But with the farmers’ market starting up, that’s created this opportunity for people to have an economically viable outlet for their food, so the food production has started to catch up to the myth. And that becomes self-perpetuating. The future for gourmet food products in Margaret River is huge. And it’s started. It’s now a reality.”

Ask them if their beloved Margaret River is the best place in the world and they’ll tell you. “Yes, it is,” Lara says. “We’ve both done lots of travel and we love our life, we just love the natural environment, the coastline, and then it is a beautiful environment to grow things, including grapes for wine. The community is small enough that it’s still a really nice community. You all have to look after each other.”

While the couple are enthusiastic about the region’s future, they are also delighted it has an important drawback. “The downside of Margaret River is also its saviour,” Jamie explains. “It’s wet in winter. It rains and it’s grey and much colder than Perth. But that’s stopped Margaret River turning into the Gold Coast.”



WE COULD ALL LEARN A LITTLE SOMETHING FROM SEAN BLOCKSIDGE, who took a novel but exceedingly practical approach when dreaming up his tour company. “To be honest, I worked backwards,” he tells West Weekend over a middy of ale at Margaret River’s Settlers Tavern. “I just thought ‘What’s my ultimate day’. And if I can find a bit of fun then maybe I can find someone who will have a bit of fun with me.”

Turns out, he could find a seemingly endless supply of them. People of all ages, from all walks of life and every corner of the globe are putting Sean’s magical tours right up there with lunch at Leeuwin. See, as some out-of-towners don’t realise, there actually is a Margaret River in Margaret River. And, as you’ll see while paddling languidly upon her beneath the canopies of majestic jarrah and marri trees, she is absolutely stunning.

Just as a person who boasts both sex appeal and intelligence might be called a thinking man or woman’s crumpet, Sean’s is the thinking tourist’s tour. But don’t for a second think that means boring.