

Labour of love:
some of the produce
from the farm



VERONIKA BLOWGREN

Bali's Bounty

Deborah Cassrels visits the mountain retreat where the island's top chefs grow their organic vegies



WAKING TO THE THUD OF stamping hooves, a slight jolt and pungent odour, I wonder if the neighbouring cows have stormed my guest hut. Slivers of daylight pierce the woven bamboo walls of the bedroom and a chorus of locusts, geese, roosters and frogs add to the cacophony. The cows are still firmly in their adjacent pen, I note on checking.

"We wanted to put the cows further up from the hut but they built the

shed here, so here it is," says a resigned Marjan van Ravenzwaaij. The cows provide natural fertiliser and are integral to her pioneering venture, The Organic Farm & Stay, in Munduk Lumbang, Tabanan, central Bali. Far from the southern tourist hub, the farm is the verdant centrepiece of a poor village nestled in mountains 700m above sea level.

Though the word organic is slightly hackneyed in Bali, it has deeper resonance at the nearly two-year-old

farm, a three-hectare eco retreat and agricultural experiment. Five of the island's top restaurants have leased plots from farmers on adjacent land, thanks to van Ravenzwaaij's role as intermediary between the relevant parties. "We don't get commission," she says, "but the chef pays a small fee to our farm director to train the farmer and check on his progress.

"Our aim is to get this area organic and keep the farmers and chefs happy. Organic farming is not new in Bali but

we are the only ones who have chefs growing their own vegetables on their own plots.”

The idea of clean, flavoursome ingredients has chefs literally climbing mountains claiming sustainable patches on which to plant their own organic seeds from around the globe. Some of the smartest tables from Ubud to Seminyak and Canggu are serving the organic vegetables and herbs cultivated at the farm, where restaurateurs lease plots of up to half a hectare.

But they're not revealing their identities. Only one of those involved – upmarket French restaurant Sardine, in Kerobokan – was prepared to go on the record about its interest in the farm. As van Ravenzwaaij explains, intense competition between chefs is behind the surprising level of secrecy.

“They get so excited when they see what's growing. They run around like little children, saying, ‘Did you see my fennel?’ But if they see a car belonging to another chef they leave. They're very competitive,” she says, adding: “They ask me what each other is growing but my lips are sealed, I can't tell.”

She does say that the cost of taking part in the venture excludes all but a handful of restaurants – those prepared to invest the time and effort required to source top-quality produce. “It's only the five-star restaurants that can afford to do it,” she says.

Seeds from countries including Australia, France, Holland, Spain and South America are being planted in the rich soil. The idea is to grow organic crops unavailable or uncommon in Bali, such as artichokes, some beans, Swiss chard, celery, Brussels sprouts, asparagus, beets and rhubarb. Herbs such as oregano, thyme and rosemary grow well, and Australian lettuce and strawberries are thriving, but some other berries have foundered, and the wet climate has ruled out tomato cultivation. Even a sample of Bali's most ubiquitous veg, spinach, tastes profoundly different here. I no longer consider the leafy green merely beneficial to my health after eating spinach soup in the farm's restaurant. Its potent flavour is

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testament to Bali's cooler, dryer climate at higher altitudes.

Van Ravenzwaaij, a 49-year-old former advertising director, swapped a hectic life in Amsterdam to move to Bali in 2003. Increasing concerns about over-development in her adopted country spurred her to launch the farm project with her partner, Wayan Sukerta, formerly a chef in Jakarta and now the farm's resident cook. Apart from the veggie patches, two bamboo guest huts (“pondoks”) and a small kitchen and restaurant, most of the farm is rainforest and open space – once abundant in Bali, now in short supply. Organic rice fields are planned under a government program, but have not been planted yet.

The back-to-basics venture, which initially had no electricity, depends on rainfall and mountain springs for water. Toilet-flushing and washing is done via buckets. “We desperately need a government water supply,” van Ravenzwaaij says of the village, which has virtually no infrastructure.

Yet there is something captivating about the farm's “conveyor belt” transport system: while reading on my hut verandah, a gentle rustling through long grass grabs my attention. Staff glide by carrying bulky materials gracefully on their heads, up hill and down dale. The tasks, executed along steep, muddy tracks amid overhanging rainforest, are quite an accomplishment. And the absence of vehicles is a blessing – at least for noise-averse guests.

As well as her role as mediator between farmers and chefs, van Ravenzwaaij employs villagers eager to learn new skills, whether it's in the farm kitchen, waiting tables, learning English or farming organically. And the farmers are profiting financially, too. Sardine, for instance, pays its



On a mission: clockwise from top left, van Ravenzwaaij with Wayan Sukerta; Sardine restaurant; on their way to pick what's ready; and a guest tending Chinese cabbages

farmers a monthly salary of 800,000 rupiah (\$88), while an average salary in Tabanan is 685,000 rupiah. This is augmented by land rental costs, also paid directly to the farmer: 100sqm costs between rupiah 300,000 (about \$35) and rupiah 500,000 a year.

The owners of Sardine, Pascal and Pika Chevillot, have extended their plot eight-fold within a year and are now building a greenhouse. It's a labour of love, the couple personally



he feels it's the right thing to do. "You have to be willing to give a lot of yourself ... it's your passion."

The benefits, he says, are clear. "The vegetables are more flavoursome and at the same time we know they are not laced with chemicals." Salad varieties do very well and, recently, tiny strawberries grown from French seeds. In contrast to the farm's other chefs, Pascal is proud to promote the farm's produce on Sardine's menu in dishes such as grilled lobster over coffee firewood with Munduk Lumbang vegetables; blackened mahi mahi with Munduk Lumbang vegetables and mango salsa; and Australian beef tenderloin with red wine reduction, shiitake Napoleon and Munduk Lumbang bok choy. And he makes a hibiscus martini using flowers flourishing on the farm.

An up-and-coming sustainable boutique resort, Suarga, on the Bukit peninsula in Bali's south, also has no intention of keeping its involvement in the farm a secret. Owners Frederick Wittesaele and Karolien Vershelden are planning to start leasing plots soon, so the produce will be ready in time for the resort's opening at the end of the year. The idea, says Vershelden, is "to combine the luxury of today with the green technology of today". Their chef, Frederic Pougault, has worked at Sardine as well as other renowned Bali restaurants Gado Gado and the Tugu Hotels in Lombok and Java.

For now, the farm is concentrating on growing vegetables, though some chefs have shown interest in the organic chickens, rabbits, ducks and geese that are raised on the farm and sometimes appear on the guest menu. However, Ravenzwaaij admits to squeamishness about their demise - and has advised chefs that foie gras is definitely off-limits. But experimentation continues: the latest trials are of figs, and goats are next on the wishlist. Not for their meat but for their cheese. If that's successful, fresh goat's cheese will soon start popping up on many more smart menus around Bali.

Just be prepared, if you ask the chef where the cheese comes from, to get a somewhat inscrutable reply. 🍄

www.theorganicfarmbali.com

collecting the produce. "We bring the vegetables down from the mountain twice a week ... whatever is ready to be picked is perfect and my chef works with it," says Pascal, a fourth-generation chef from Burgundy.

"You're not just doing a grocery list that you send to your supplier. We change our menu every day so we can adjust the dishes according to which vegetables are ready," he says. Though costs have doubled and it's hard work,

ELOISE KERVIEL; VERONIKA BLOMGREN



JOHN LETHLEAN

Starting from scratch

AN EMPTY PANTRY, A barren fridge... a taunting combination of nightmare and opportunity. Rarely does the chance to start a kitchen from scratch happen. It sharpens the focus

on What Really Matters. A chance to shop for my favourite things.

What follows is not an exhaustive shopping list, but rather a skeleton to put a bit of flesh on. A personal larder survival kit, categorised in a way that works for me. While it may look like just a list, what I learned is that it's actually a rather revealing palate self-portrait. And while spending \$500 in a weekend on stuff for the pantry is tough, looked at another way, it's only the cost of 100 bags of fried chips at the footy. I broke the list down into "things"... it did the trick.

Oily things: (butter, olive oil, sesame oil, canola oil, mayonnaise). Olive oil is my life blood.

Smelly: (garlic, onions). Garlic keeps me awake, yet...

Milky: (yoghurt, Parmigiano, pecorino, fetta,

Saffron and turmeric, ginger, star anise, vanilla... Happiness is a charged grinder

mozzarella, coconut milk and cream).

Fishy: (anchovies, dried shrimp, shrimp paste, fish sauce, Worcestershire sauce, oyster sauce). Is there anything an anchovy doesn't enhance?

Tinny: (whole tomatoes, chickpeas, tuna, tomato passata and paste). For lazy days.

Acidic: (lemon, lime, rice wine, white and red wine vinegars, Dijon mustard). A lemon is the fruit equivalent of an anchovy.

Spicy: (pepper, chilli, cinnamon, cardamom, cumin, coriander seeds, cloves, fennel, Szechuan pepper, saffron and turmeric, ginger, star anise, vanilla). Happiness is a charged grinder.

Fruity: (assorted dried fruits). You never know.

Herby: (parsley, basil, chives, coriander, mint). The real meaning of going green.

Porky: (chorizo, pancetta, bacon). Usually the start of something good.

Starchy: (bread, pasta, rice, couscous, lentils, polenta, flours for pizza and pasta). Pasta is a whole food group unto itself.

Nutty: (tahini, almonds, quinoa, walnuts, poppy seeds, peanuts, oats). Essential value-adders.

Sweet: (honey, sugar). Lower priority.

Coffee: (espresso blend, single origin beans for filter). Thank goodness for legal drugs.

Tea: (English breakfast, orange pekoe). Because you can't drink coffee all day.

Salty: (salt flakes, cooking salt, soy, miso paste, Vegemite, stock cubes). In serious quantities.

Earthy: (porcini, shiitake). Alas, no truffle.

Miracle: (eggs). Plus some really good bread.

I did it all last weekend... Maybe I'll take a photo; it can only be downhill from here. 🍄

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