



## PLAYING WITH FIRE

As harnessing the elements becomes ever more critical, food purveyors in New South Wales, Australia, are taking steps toward a more sustainable dining culture. **KATE GIBBS** visits with a Sydney grill master working to ignite change.

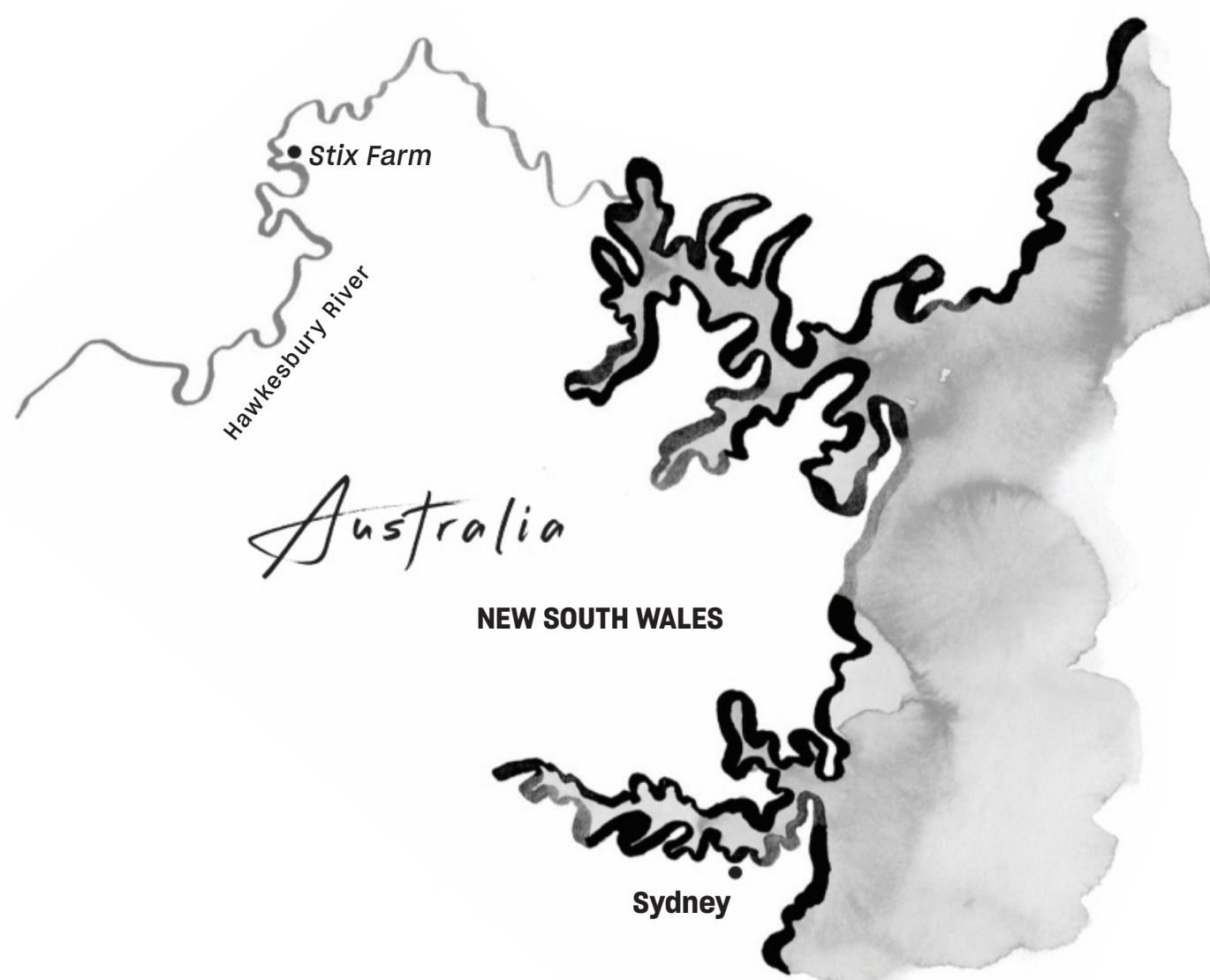
IN THE BANKS of the wide Hawkesbury River, about 90 minutes northwest of Sydney, chef Lennox Hastie stoked the embers of a campfire. Sparks flew into the cool night sky as curls of smoke rose from a whole lamb that was roasting, spread-eagled, above the pit. As he tended to dinner, Hastie told me about the cooking

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: NIKKI TO/COURTESY OF TOURISM AUSTRALIA (3); NIKKI TO/COURTESY OF FIREDOOR





◀ Clockwise from top left: Barbecued mud crabs at Stix Farm, in New South Wales; glamping at Stix; chef Lennox Hastie chats with diners at the Sydney restaurant Firedoor; radicchio on the grill at Firedoor; Hastie roasts a lamb at Stix.



techniques he uses at Firedoor, his acclaimed Sydney restaurant. The focus of his kitchen is also the country's most sensitive subject. "Fire is a difficult topic because it has this powerful beauty, yet it can be destructive," Hastie said, shifting an ironbark log with his boot.

Watching him manage the flames, I felt wary. Safe as we were on the grounds of Stix Farm last September, our entire nation was still reeling from the previous summer's bushfires. In a typical year, Stix supplies 20 to 30 varieties of organic vegetables to some of Sydney's top restaurants, including Firedoor. But in October 2019 and the hot summer that followed, fire spread over more than 12 million acres in the surrounding state of New South Wales. Across

Stix's 40 acres, several weeks' worth of lettuce, kale, and chard harvests were destroyed.

As I warmed my hands over the embers of the campfire, it was impossible to miss the irony of taking comfort from something that had recently ravaged this landscape—one of Australia's original food bowls. Little did I know that the pristine setting would be swallowed by water just a few months later. A riverfront cabin, vegetable beds, livelihoods—all washed away.

The flooding was the latest in a series of compounding natural disasters that have bombarded Australia since early last year. But if a silver lining exists, it's that our country has been jolted into action. The Australian idiom "she'll be right" expresses a belief that whatever is wrong will correct itself with time. It's a laid-back attitude deeply ingrained in the Australian psyche, but it can also engender a dangerous apathy. The events of 2020 demonstrated that unless we actively work to protect our environment and the systems that influence it, the likelihood is that, actually, she won't be right.

Chefs and small-scale food producers have been leading the way in making Australia's culinary scene more sustainable. Early colonial settlers had tamed fertile floodplains along the Hawkesbury into orchards and vegetable plots; now present-day suppliers are battling climate change through biodynamic farming and other responsible practices. Hastie and I had ventured out to the region to get a sense of how these stewards are driving progress—and how the rest of us might do our part.

Stix Farm's owner and chef David Allison and his team have demonstrated a dogged determination not only to adopt eco-friendly methods but also to help educate the public. In 2019, they launched farm tours and overnight glamping experiences. I stayed in a large canvas bell tent outfitted with thick mattresses, wool blankets, a gas lantern, and a jar of Firedoor's smoked negroni. After waking to birdsong and feasting on Hastie's eggs, mushrooms, and shaved truffles cooked over yet another fire, I thought, *I want to live like this every day.*

That morning, Allison gave us a tour of the open-air produce enclosures and the greenhouses where seedlings are raised. We picked crisp white-tipped radishes to dip into mounds of house-made tarama, snapped off asparagus stalks and ate them raw, and collected broccoli and pea shoots that Hastie served smoke-kissed and paired with black olives.





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*Stix Farm frequently hosts alfresco meals on its grounds.*

#### HOW TO BOOK

T+L A-List advisor **Cassandra Bookholder** ([cassandrab@camelbacktravel.com](mailto:cassandrab@camelbacktravel.com); 602-889-5902) can coordinate a culinary tour of New South Wales that includes visits to farms like **Stix** ([stix.com.au](http://stix.com.au)) and top-tier restaurants like **Firedoor** ([firedoor.com.au](http://firedoor.com.au); tasting menu \$109).

“Farmers are quirky as hell,” Hastie said as he handed me a singed stick holding a coil of damper, a traditional Australian campfire bread he’d drizzled with honey. “But it’s important for a chef to understand the difficulties they face. Gary the prawner has to rely on his methods and what nature brings him.”

The Gary he was speaking of is Gary Howard, a second-generation fisherman who has spent 30 years sustainably trawling for wild prawns on the Hawkesbury River from his boat, the *Kristy Ann*. Howard and his enthusiastic Labrador, Wally, greeted us as we climbed aboard. As we pushed off from the shore, Howard showed me how undersized juveniles can swim through the trawler’s net, along with unwanted catches, so they can continue to grow and reproduce.

Australia imports 70 percent of its seafood, forcing local anglers to compete with low prices that perpetuate overfishing elsewhere. “The general public thinks there are no prawns left in Australia, but there’s enough here,” Howard said. Man-made dams are another problem in New South Wales, he added. The structures are meant to direct the natural water flow to the growing population of Sydney, but in the process, they’ve disrupted ecosystems at the river’s source.

“We have to find a way to work with nature,” Hastie said with a sigh. “We can set the conditions, but nature will do its thing. The producers we work with are passionate about what they do, and we need to take time to listen.” That’s one reason Hastie adapts his menu to include whatever produce is in season. As I packed for our departure, I wondered

why—especially given the increased zeal for farm-to-table cooking during the past 20 years—diners still demand tomatoes in winter and expect spring peas year-round.

The next evening, back at Firedoor, Hastie worked the grills and trapdoor wood ovens to produce one more meal for me, starting with a snack of kangaroo and malted flatbread, macadamia crumb, and native Davidson’s plum. Even inside this rustic-industrial space in the middle of the city, I could sense the Hawkesbury in the smell drifting through the room and the glow of the open kitchen.

Using his fingers, Hastie turned marron (local crayfish) and sprinkled salt over his bonfires, eventually plating the crustaceans with indigenous finger lime (a type of citrus with juice-filled pearls inside) and sea blite (a fernlike coastal shrub). Salty bites of succulents enlivened Murray cod cooked in paperbark. Sugarloaf cabbage from Stix Farm came with charred kale and celeriac. Between mouthfuls, we watched Hastie tame the fire and lamented the ways humans had traded this kind of alchemy for modern convenience. I vowed to buy less from packets and grow more—in balcony pots if I must.

As the night concluded, I felt buoyed by what I’d seen over the past couple of days. Maybe she *will* be right. At times, it seems that all we have Down Under is hope amid the ashes. But perhaps the sheer grit of a few dedicated individuals can be just the spark we need to guide us forward. ●

*Kate Gibbs* ([kategibbs.com](http://kategibbs.com); @kategibbs) is a Sydney-based writer and podcast host.