





WORDS Lindy Schneider | PHOTOGRAPHY Supplied by Buxton Trout Farm

The Great Survivor

THE STORY OF BUXTON TROUT AND SALMON FARM
IS ONE OF HARDSHIP, SURVIVAL AND HOPE

Nestled among the trees, with a backdrop of birdsong and the tumbling melody of the Steavenson River, the Buxton Trout and Salmon Farm is home to owner Mitch McRae, partner Deb and their two daughters.

The Yarra Valley and Buxton are part of their lifeblood, as are the qualities of resilience and adaptability. Buxton Trout and Salmon Farm has now endured flash flooding, catastrophic bushfire and, most recently, a pandemic. In 2009, the Black Saturday bushfires decimated the area. Mitch and his family sheltered at the property, using the fish farm's water pumps to fight the fire. Grateful to have survived, Mitch believes in the power and strength found in community – this being pivotal in helping his small business to adapt and endure. The farm was re-established quite literally from the ashes.

"It's taken everything we have, but we were determined and drew strength from the encouragement of our community," says Mitch. "We lost everything. Just the increase in water temperature wiped out our entire fish population, let alone the devastation caused by the flames on the land and infrastructure. We watched it burn."

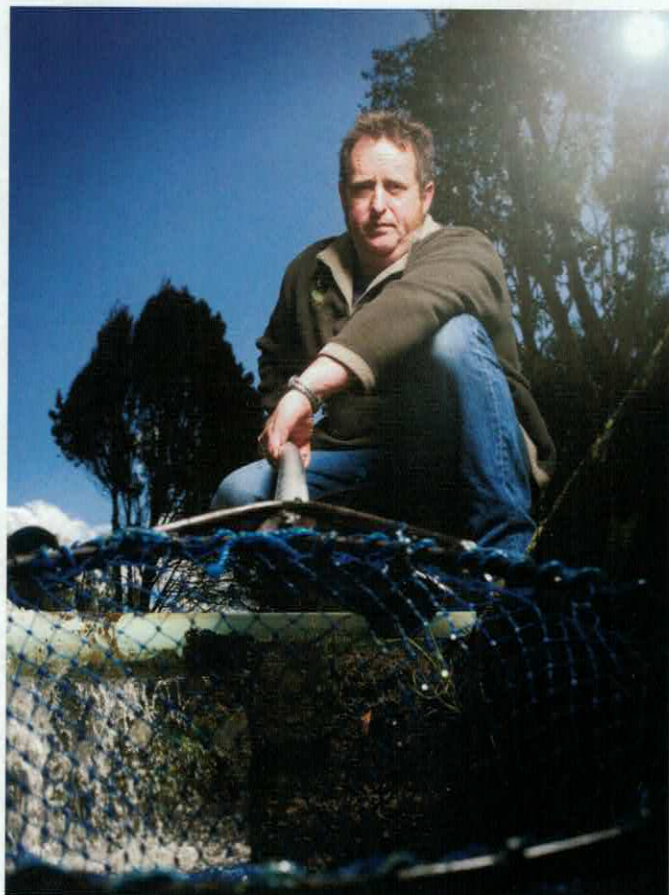
"We learnt an important lesson about community support and strength – locals, customers, suppliers, friends and complete strangers – everybody in our community pulled together to help us rebuild."

The farm now welcomes about 40,000 visitors a year, with the chance to leave Melbourne behind and relax in the big outdoors a big part of the appeal. "Cooking a fish you've caught that day on one of our barbecues is deeply rewarding," Mitch says. "I know people get hooked – it's a perfect social activity in nature!"

"Connecting to nature is very healing. The feeling of being surrounded by water can be relaxing and therapeutic for visitors. It's one of the things that drew me to the farm in the first place and I find it a refuge now more than ever. I love being surrounded by native gums, yellow flowering wattle, native platypus and eagles. The beauty of the Yarra Valley never ceases to leave me with a sense of awe. We are fortunate to live in the most beautiful spot in the world."

The application of advanced aquaculture techniques ensures Mitch and the team, as protein farmers, are sustainable and viable – innovation that has constant relevance in the world adapting to climate change. "Aquaculture now accounts for more than 50 per cent of fish production worldwide – it was only about 15 per cent when I first entered the industry," Mitch says.

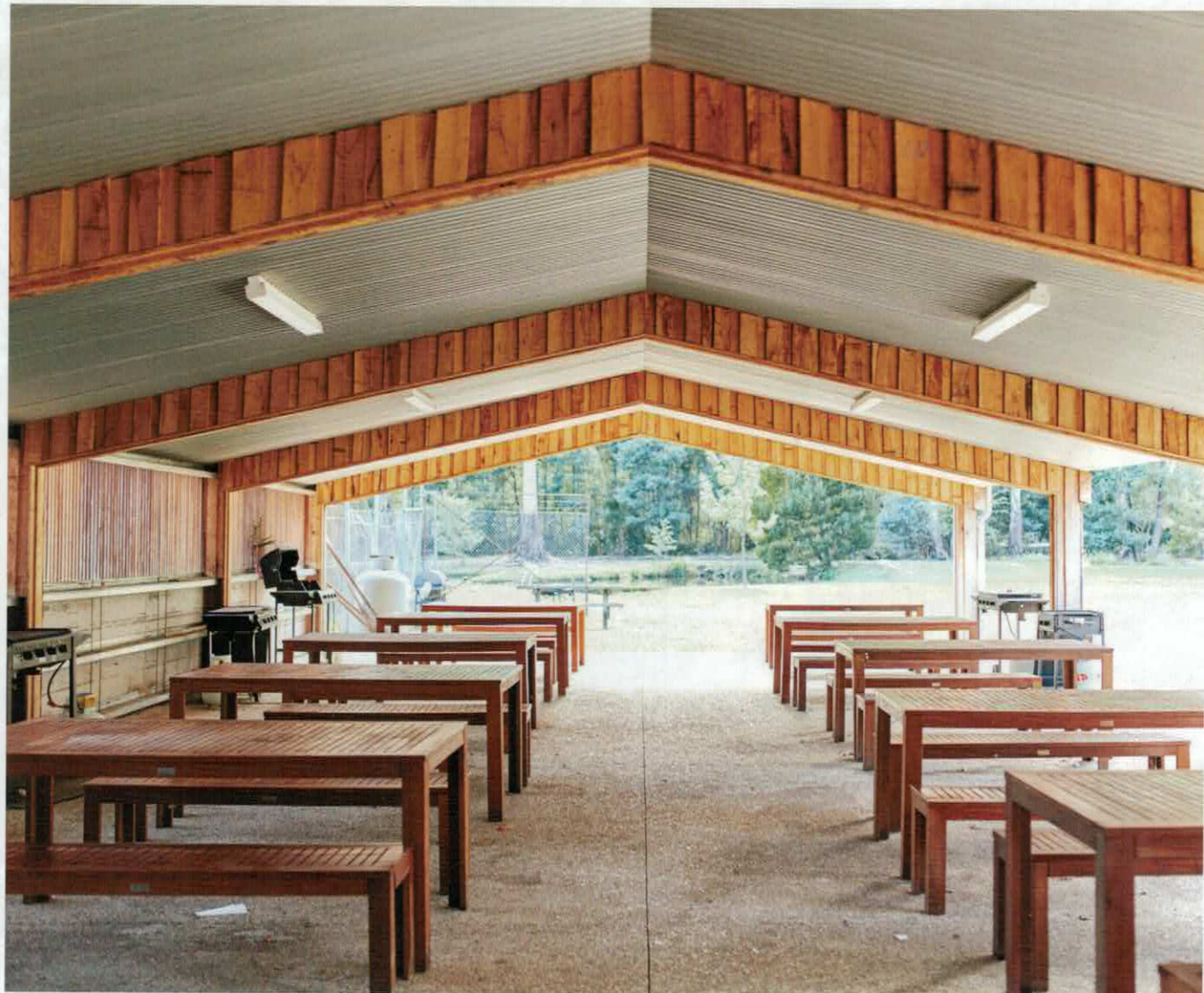




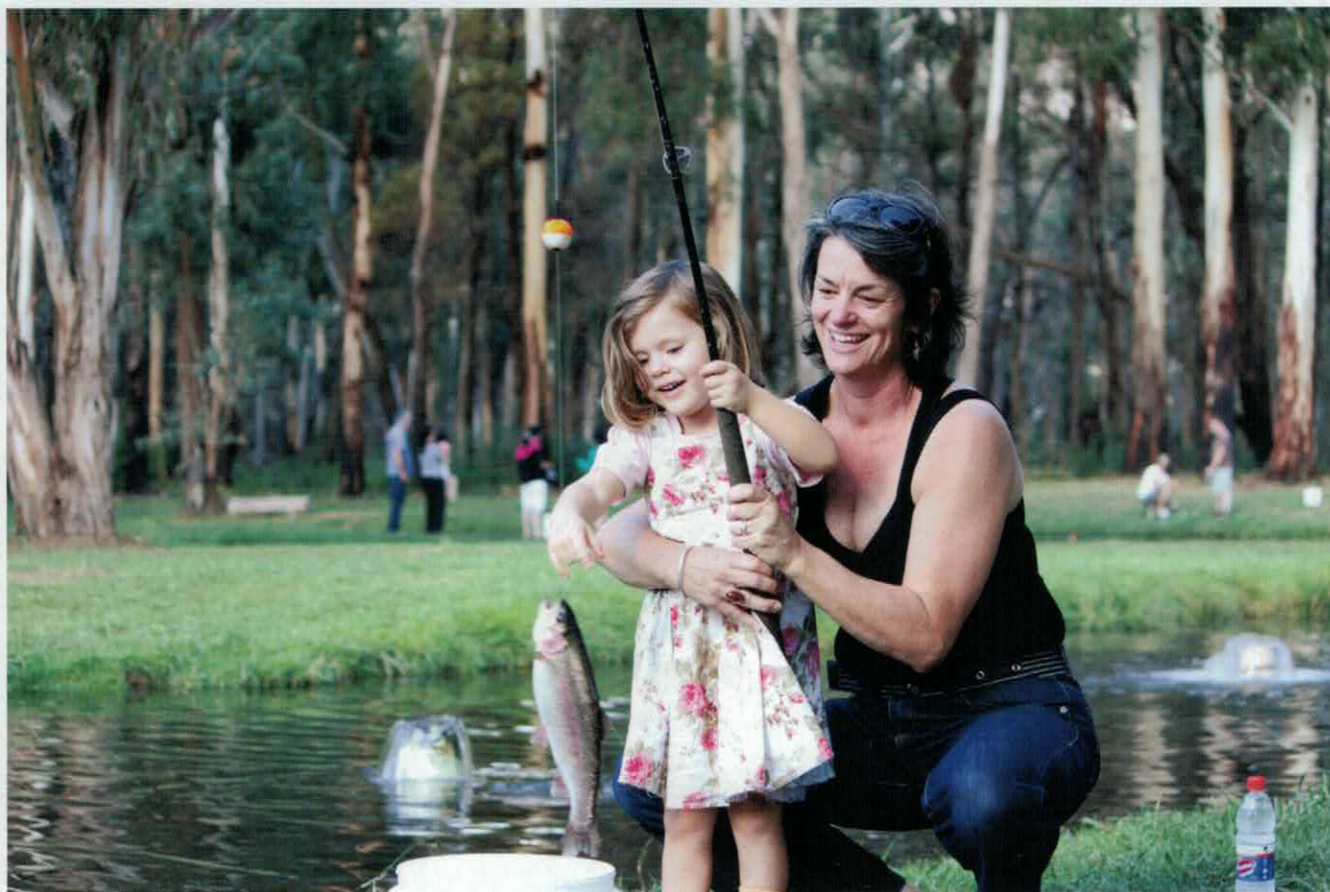
The Murrindindi area is responsible for around 85 per cent of Australia's Atlantic salmon and rainbow trout production, and the Buxton Trout and Salmon Farm has the honour of being Australia's first-ever commercial trout farm. It's no trade secret that the pristine waters of the Steavenson River that flow from the snow-laced mountains, deep behind the Lake Mountain range, are one of the keys to success. "Salmon and trout don't thrive in higher temperature waters, so the cool climate and water temperatures of this region – ideally 20 degrees – are perfectly suited to their needs," says Mitch.

Growing about 80 tonnes of fish every year, Buxton Trout and Salmon Farm is proud of its premium product and its position in the market. Driven by a lifelong passion for excellence, the idyllic farm has grown from an idea into a leader in its field. "There was nothing out here, so we had to set up at every step," Mitch says. "This means we have full vertical integration and can control the quality right through the entire process. We've been adaptable and innovative, and we're prepared to try new things."

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Years ago, when the idea came to smoke their fish, Mitch had a Dutch neighbour from across the road teach them the craft of European-style smoking, using only mountain ash timber in a hand-built brick cabinet. This ‘no-electricity, no-gas’ technique is still used today and imparts a particular flavour that consumers and restaurants love.

“The other product that has recently caught the imagination of Australians is our home-grown caviar,” Mitch says. “With just a short two-week period every May to ‘milk the fish’, a process done by hand where roe is gently squeezed from the fish’s belly, it is a premium product that is in high demand.”

Can you ever eat too much fish? Mitch laughs and suggests variety is the key. “My favourite dish in summer is a Caesar salad made with smoked trout, and in winter, handmade pasta with fresh salmon, lemon, cream and capers is perfect,” he says. “But seriously, you can’t go wrong any day of the year with our fresh trout or salmon flaked on a crusty baguette, with a dollop of mayonnaise and a squeeze of lemon.” ■

For more information, visit www.buxtontrout.com.au