

Working with Nature

Organic produce is integral to the philosophy behind this thriving, family-run farm in the scenic Manning Valley.



There's a feeling of isolation and tranquility on this 300 acre organic farm: the lofty heights of Killabakh Mountain loom nearby, and dramatic views of the coast stretch below as far as the eye can see. Red Plateau Organic Produce is situated about 650 metres above sea level at Moorall Creek in the Manning Valley, with Wingham to the south and Comboyne to the northeast.

The remote location of this unique property – with its rich, red volcanic soil and abundant rainfall – first drew Red Plateau's owners Sandra Fishwick and Matthew Hanly here about 24 years ago. They bought parcels of land bordering state forest and started their farm, initially growing potatoes, pumpkin, garlic, tomatoes and corn.

But Sandra says that intensive market gardening didn't have long-term appeal, and

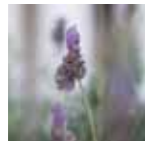




OPPOSITE PAGE Red Plateau continues to increase its organic citrus crop. **THIS PAGE, TOP** Joey checks on the beehives. **ABOVE LEFT** The family is never short of macadamias. **ABOVE RIGHT** Carl has organic certification for his Eureka lemons.



CASUAL *elegance*



Beyond the rambling verandahs, behind the country garden, is the Old Bakery, lovingly restored into a unique and captivating venue. Stone and wood from a century ago, meets with modern style and comfort. With your dreams in mind, Harvest has created a new space for your next special event. From 2 people to 100, weddings, parties or intimate dinners. Everything is possible at the Harvest Old Bakery. Come by sometime and feel the ambience for yourself, it's a pleasure.



PHONE 02 6687 2644
18 OLD PACIFIC HIGHWAY
NEWRYBAR VILLAGE NSW 2479
www.harvestcafe.com.au

Harvest

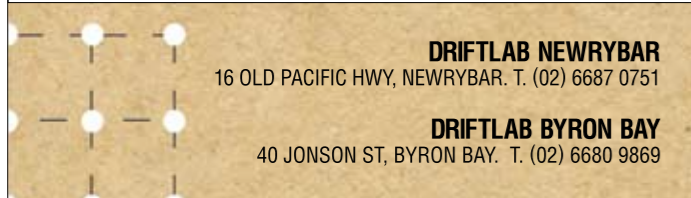


driftlab

Driftlab Newrybar

Nestled in the Historic village of Newrybar, discover Driftlab. Offering unique, high quality apparel, footwear and accessories.

EDWIN **G-STAR RAW** *goddess of babylon*



DRIFTLAB NEWRYBAR
16 OLD PACIFIC HWY, NEWRYBAR. T. (02) 6687 0751

DRIFTLAB BYRON BAY
40 JONSON ST, BYRON BAY. T. (02) 6680 9869

in the years that followed 600 macadamia trees were planted, followed by 200 avocados. These days, avocados are the primary crop (there are now 1400 trees and counting), although the farm still produces macadamias – along with pecans and chestnuts – as well as tangelos, lemons and oranges.

It takes about three years for fledgling avocado trees to yield fruit, and about eight to 10 years before they're considered mature, but Sandra says it's well worth the effort: "We had one tree last year that would have had over 400kgs of fruit! The average is probably around 250 to 300kgs in a good year."

With the trees flowering for just a three-week period in mid-spring, sunny, dry conditions over 23 degrees Celsius are ideal for pollination (or "flower set") and lead to optimum fruit yield if the weather remains favourable.

Red Plateau harvests bi-annually, which means there is still mature fruit ready to be picked when next season's flowers appear. Green skin avocado varieties mature earlier, while Hass and Reed are picked later in the season. This combination of varieties (and the fact that mature fruit can be left on the tree without spoiling for some time) means that the farm's fruit is selectively hand-picked from late spring all the way through to mid March.

While the timing of harvesting is largely a commercial decision, the extended maturation time can also lead to higher oil content in the fruit, creating that trademark buttery avocado texture.

The fruit is distributed to Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne as well as selected north coast vendors, reaching stores such as Coles and Woolworths within just three to four days of being harvested.

While organic certification by Aus-Qual is important in terms of marketing and consumer confidence, organic practices have always been part of the philosophy at Red Plateau. Grass is grown up around the trees and then cut and mulched to support the soil. Any fruit that touches the ground can't be harvested, so fallen avocados are also left around the base of the trees. "Building the bio-life of the soil is the key aspect of having a healthy tree, and if you've got a healthy tree you'll have healthy, good quality fruit," says Sandra. "If you dig in under our trees you'll find handfuls of worms!"

Like the avocados, the citrus orchards have also steadily increased in size over time, with up to 100 new trees added each year. But why tangelos? "We were told they were very good, and we thought that the market could handle something different like that," says Sandra. "People in Melbourne really like them."

Unlike the extended avocado harvest, this citrus is picked within a four-week period in the middle of spring. Taste testing is the most reliable indicator of the readiness for harvest: the early fruit has a sour tang similar to grapefruit, maturing to an intensely sweet flavour when the optimum ripeness is reached.

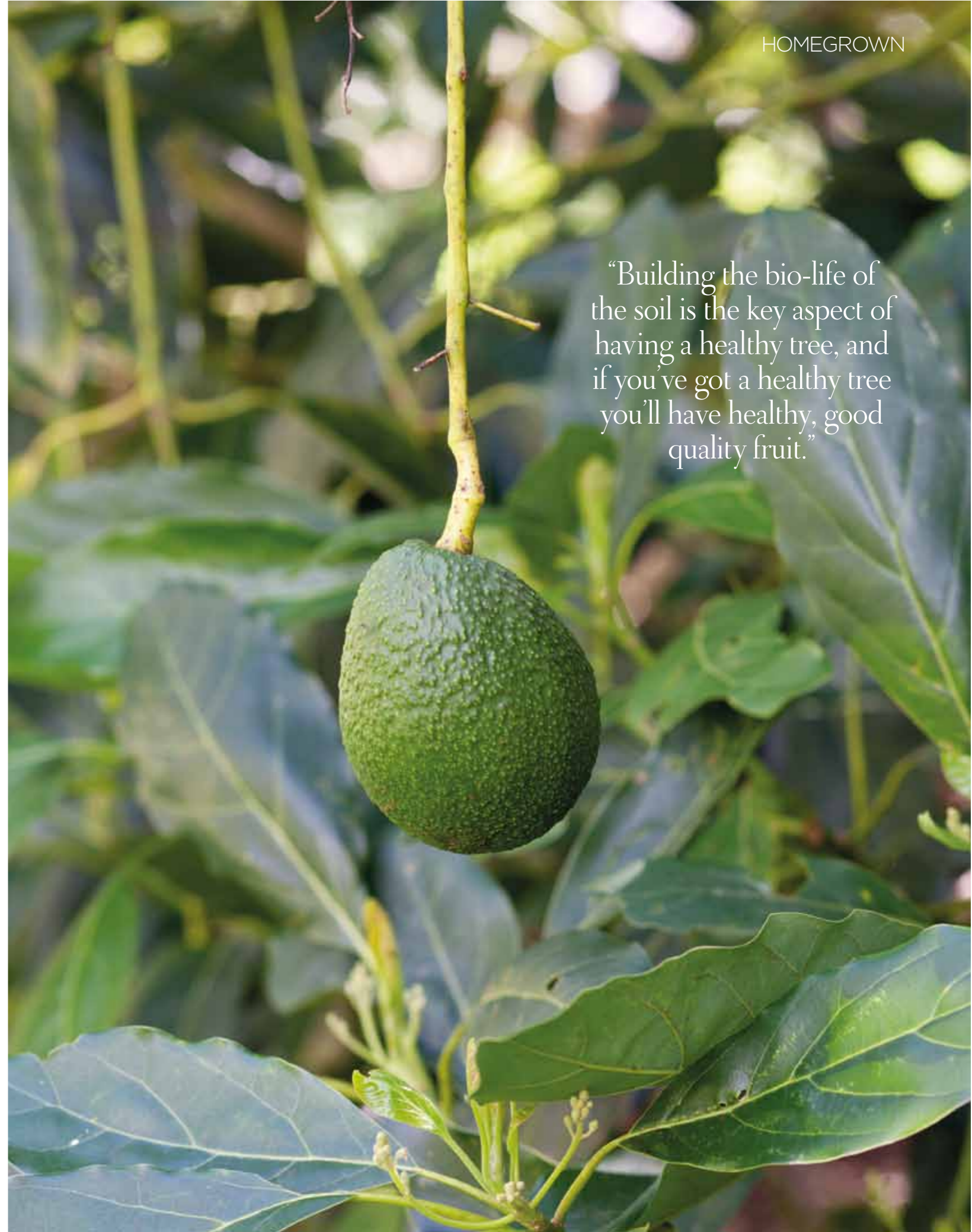
Matthew lives on the farm and manages the property, and sons – Carl and Joey – have both chosen farming careers; Carl has achieved organic certification for his Eureka lemon crop and Joey is currently learning about compost tea brews to nourish the avocado trees.

Joey also tends the farm's fledgling honeybee apiary, and there are plans to expand the number of hives and undertake organic certification. (Sandra says beehives are common on avocado plantations as they can boost fruit production, and both she and daughter Rebecca have completed a course on beekeeping at Tocal College in the Hunter Valley).

Initial test jars of Red Plateau's honey have been promising, and Sandra attributes the rich flavour to the citrus trees and grasses on the farm and its proximity to extensive forested areas.

And aside from honey, Red Plateau has also added another new product: two varieties of marmalade have been created by Eric Robinson from The Other Chef Fine Foods at Port Macquarie which Sandra has recently launched with the help of daughter Jasmine. "We source the fruit wholly from our farm," Sandra says. "And I'm also hoping to go into making macadamia honey bars or biscuits, and perhaps avocado and macadamia oils."

WORDS: MELISSA ELIAS IMAGES: RUSSELL PELL



"Building the bio-life of the soil is the key aspect of having a healthy tree, and if you've got a healthy tree you'll have healthy, good quality fruit."