



love bloomed

A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ROSE GROWER FOUND HIS ITALIAN PARTNER ON A CYCLING ODYSSEY.

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KALANGADOO SOUTH AUSTRALIA | *the good life*

Brian Wagner and Benedetta Rusconi with Luca, six, and three-year-old Chiara behind a row of 'Bonica' ("One of the best shrub roses ever bred," says Brian). Chiara holds a Delbard rose, 'La Rouge et Le Noir'.
FACING PAGE Two more Delbard roses, the pink 'Sister Emmanuelle' and the striped 'Maurice Utrillo' that Brian declares is "among my favourite roses, great for cutting".



ITALIAN PHOTOJOURNALIST Benedetta Rusconi was in Ireland's Aran Islands working on a travel feature in 2003 when she came across a cyclist towing a trailer filled with golf clubs and camping gear.

"I thought, 'Wow, this is an interesting person!'" she says. "He seemed a very happy man..."

The bloke on the bike was South Australian rose grower Brian Wagner, a man partial to an adventure who had previously pedalled around China and India. As fate would have it, the intrepid traveller checked into the same hostel as Benedetta and the pair became friends over dinner. A fortnight later she was showing Brian around her Milan home. "I didn't quite make it all the way around Ireland," says Brian with a smile.

For the next three years, they pursued a long-distance relationship, meeting in destinations dictated by magazine assignments and flower seasons, until Benedetta agreed to pack up her apartment and give Australian life a go. For the first 12 months, she was based in Adelaide,

studying commercial photography while Brian worked hard at his rose nursery at Kalangadoo near the Limestone Coast. But the arrival of their son Luca, now six, heralded a permanent move to the bush.

"It was such a big change coming from Europe; you find yourself alone in this huge space and it's a strange feeling that's difficult to get used to," Benedetta says. "I would push the pram down the main street of Penola, and stop at every shop and café to say hello; that was a good way to meet people. I would also go to the supermarket and just stare; I still can't believe that you can have a whole row of just potato chips — in Italy we have only two brands!"

Slowly, Benedetta has embraced the gentle rhythm of country life and its freedom of choice, raising Luca and three-year-old daughter Chiara while also pursuing her photography and supporting Brian in the business he had taken over from his parents.

Wagner's Rose Nursery produces around 160,000 rose bushes each season, supplying garden centres nationwide >



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE Luca inspects the apricot 'Valencia'; heading for a farmers' market with a ute full of flowers; 'Paul Cezanne', another Delbard rose; "I see the best sunrises every day," Brian says; 'Brass Band', a bush floribunda. FACING PAGE Brian inherited the nursery business from his parents, and moved it from South Australia's McLaren Vale to the Limestone Coast; today, the 50-hectare property produces around 160,000 rose bushes a year.





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT 'Valencia' and the multicoloured 'Eyes For You'; 'Sister Emmanuelle' is one of some 650 varieties grown on the property; Luca perched on a bull bar.



in addition to selling locally at farmers' markets, where buckets of freshly cut blooms are always in high demand. The roses thrive in the fertile paddocks and are the best the world has to offer, with the latest releases flown in from gardens around the globe.

"We grow around 650 different varieties of roses, including lots of Delbards and David Austins," Brian says. "The key priorities are plant health and fragrance." A heady scent fills the air at the 50-hectare property, where a line of ancient red gums forms a dramatic backdrop to the rows of exquisite colour. "I see the best sunrises every day," Brian says.

Benedetta has also come to love the landscape. "I don't like the flies, and there's no escaping the sun and the heat, but Australia gives you a sense of freedom, and the space is unbelievable," she says. "Your eyes are a wide-angle lens with such a large horizon; this doesn't happen in Europe."

Each year, Benedetta and Brian take the children to a family beach house near the Italian Riviera's Cinque Terre region, and now it's Brian who needs to acclimatise. "I've spent my life surfing remote beaches, so it's taken some time to get used to hiring your own plot of sand, due to the crowds," he says. "But now I look forward to the routine of buying fresh focaccia for breakfast, going for walks and feeling part of a busy village."

While Benedetta savours the familiar smells of the bakery, the fish shop and the patisseries — "You walk with your nose in Italy, but you don't do that here" — Brian tries hard to resist buying every vase he sees.

"He's always looking for vases when he travels and imagining which rose would look best in them," Benedetta says. "You could go nuts with all that Venetian glass," says Brian with another ready smile. * *Wagner's Rose Nursery is at Kalangadoo, South Australia. (08) 8739 3321; www.wagnersrosenursery.com.au*