

# Hotel homecoming

THE PUBLICANS OF THE BELLUM HOTEL HAVE SPENT THE PAST DECADE TURNING A TYPICAL COUNTRY PUB INTO A COMMUNITY HUB THAT SERVES AWARD-WINNING LOCALLY SOURCED MEALS.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS JO FINCHAM

LISA EDWARDS was enjoying the hectic pace of life working as an interior designer in London when a phone call to the family farm on South Australia's Limestone Coast revealed that the local pub was on the market. The news sent a wave of nostalgia across the ocean, and her now husband, Simon Livingstone, needed little convincing that a tree change was in order. But this was more than your average homecoming after four-and-a-half years abroad – The Bellum Hotel had been built in 1866 by Lisa's great, great, great grandfather, Thomas Edwards. Originally from Wales, he settled in the Mount Schank area in 1854 after striking it lucky on the Victorian goldfields, and his drinking spot at the base of the majestic Mount Schank volcano became a popular halfway house for travellers on the long journey from Mount Gambier to Port MacDonnell.

Today, thirsty drivers still swing by for a roadie en-route to the 'Mount' or 'Bay', and that oasis-like quality of the pub on the highway remains. "When we first moved here, I used to joke that my only friends were cows; we went from being surrounded by people the second you walk out your front door to being surrounded by farmland, so it was such a culture shock," Lisa says.

Lisa's father, Dean Edwards, now farms the land Thomas Edwards originally cleared while her brother, Michael, lives with his young family on the site of the original homestead. "It's lovely to have that strong family connection, but even if they weren't close by, there is an enormously strong sense of community here and that immediate sense of knowing everyone," Lisa says.

"We have one regular who has been drinking here six days a week since the late 1950s," says Simon, who was raised in Roxby Downs. The bloke's name is Normie, and he still remembers having an underage tippie at The Bellum after the 1959 Kongorong bushfires. Right beside his favourite stool, a glass floor over the cellar highlights the challenge the original builders would have faced digging through the local limestone. On the wall, there's a photo of a bravery medal that belonged to another licensee, Henry Smith (1868), who helped to rescue the survivors of the Admella shipwreck, while out the back of the pub, the old barn for the horses of travelling guests is still in good shape.

To their enormous credit, Simon and Lisa have fully embraced community life, creating a string of innovative events supporting various causes. The hotel car park has been transformed into a theme park during 'fun days' to raise money for local children

battling illness, while the restaurant has hosted everything from fashion parades to head shaves. During the month of November, generous patrons helped The Bellum raise more than \$23,000 as part of the U.G.L.Y. Bartender campaign supporting the Leukaemia Foundation. The original plan was for barman Cole Hedwards to lose his locks, but Lisa and two girlfriends also got in on the act, while Simon agreed to wax his chest, legs and armpits. "They went for \$200," he laughs. "We ended up finishing second highest in the nation – the community support down here is really amazing, and the fact that everyone knows everyone can be a really lovely thing if people need help," Lisa says.

But The Bellum's success doesn't end at fundraising. In recent years, the Australian Hotels Association has declared it South Australia's Best Family Casual Dining and Best Pub Style Accommodation. In 2009, it was also named the home of South Australia's Best Pub Burger for its decadent blend of sour dough bun topped with rosemary butter, goats cheese aioli, caramelised onion, semi-dried tomato, pancetta and, of course, Mount Schank lamb. "The response we got after winning this award was amazing – we sold 300 burgers the month after the comp, and we still have people specifically dropping by for this burger," Simon says.

The Bellum is also a popular venue for work shows, Christmas parties, weddings and other celebrations. "We organise everything from the buses to the entertainment and menu packages, so it becomes a real night out for people," Simon says.

Simon and Lisa still pinch themselves when they think that they started off with a simple three-year plan. After five years, they bought the freehold, and now they are gearing up to toast their 10th anniversary as publicans. Along the way, Harris, 7, Molly, 5, and Oscar, 3, have arrived on the scene, and have become a popular fixture in the front bar.

"There have been times when it's been absolutely frantic and we've thought it might be time to move on, but at the end of the day, we really do enjoy it – and besides, Harris has just learned to play pool, so he doesn't want to go anywhere!" Simon laughs.

## BELLUM HOTEL

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The unassuming exterior of the Bellum Pub; Lisa Edwards and Simon Livingstone with their children (l-r) Harris, 7, Molly, 5, and Oscar, 3; the Bellum's award-winning burger.