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DECEMBER 31-JANUARY 6

# Bountiful harvest

SAVOUR  
HOMEGROWN  
FLAVOURS ON  
THIS FARM GATE  
TRAIL, WRITES

**BRIAR JENSEN**

**G**etting down and dirty is part of the fun. Though I'll admit the first time I didn't get down, I just got dirty. The heavens opened as we arrived at Hawkesbury Vegetable Farm in Wilberforce, turning the rich black soil into thick, sticky mud.

I let owner Vicky Sultana get down and pick the celery, leeks and endive while I sheltered under an umbrella with a basket.

Since that first foray on the Hawkesbury Farm Gate Trail, I've been back many times to stock up on its bounteous offerings, from fruit and vegetables, nuts and honey to homemade pies and condiments.

Since the 1790s, when pioneers settled the fertile banks of the Hawkesbury, the region has been Sydney's food bowl.

Now the population is expanding so quickly it threatens





to engulge the agricultural land that feeds it, something that worries farmers such as John Maguire, owner of Enniskillen Orchard in Grose Vale.

Maguire is a founding member of Hawkesbury Harvest, the association behind the Farm Gate Trail, which offers customers the freshest possible produce while giving farmers direct sales.

"Selling direct to the public gives me the ability to grow tasty fruit instead of pretty fruit," says John Watkins, who offers pick-your-own oranges and mandarins on his property next to the river at Lower Hawkesbury.

He employs practices that produce the best flavour, rather than the blemish-free fruit sought by supermarkets. He insists we try fruit from trees in different parts of the orchard because differences in soil, tree health and fruit age affect flavour. He wants us to pick only the fruit we find most delicious.

Watkins Farm is popular with families who picnic among the trees. Lebanese families come early in the season, as they like their fruit slightly sour, while



**Fertile endeavour:** John Maguire (above) is a founding member of the Hawkesbury Harvest; local produce at the Orange Spot, Wilberforce; market day at Castle Hill offers rich seasonal pickings



Koreans come mid-season for the imperial mandarins that taste like those from home.

As Australians we tend to take for granted access to fresh produce, a point brought home to me by two Singaporean women.

They were stocking up on their last day in Sydney, happy to pay excess baggage for boxes of produce, because they could verify its origin and freshness.

Picking your own is a fun way to show children where their food comes from. Bill Shields, of Shields Orchard in Bilpin, still gets a thrill watching city kids find their first four-leaf clover or bite into an orchard-fresh apple they've picked themselves.

But the Farm Gate Trail isn't all about picking your own fruit.

Most Farm Gate members sell their produce in roadside sheds. Some, like Enniskillen Orchard, stock a selection of fresh home and locally grown produce, with jams and sauces with handwritten labels and gingham tops.

The small cafe serves fresh scones and tarts on the back veranda, which overlooks a tree-fringed dam to the hills beyond. As I take in the view it's hard to believe these hills are under threat from residential development. Maguire hopes tourism and the trail will turn the region into the Tuscany of the South Pacific.

While the trail is within an hour of Sydney, members are spread from the river flats to the highlands, so it's worth making a day — or weekend — of it. Sample local drops at Tizzana Winery in Ebenezer, apple pie at The Local Harvest, Bilpin, and fresh berry ice cream at nearby Tutti Fruitti, where you can also get fragrant roses in season.

In jacaranda-framed Kurrajong

Village, both Wrapt and Sassafras Creek offer light meals featuring local produce, and for fine dining there's two-hatted Lochiel House in Kurrajong Heights.

But if you haven't got time to do the farm gate rounds, head to the Hawkesbury Harvest Farmers & Fine Food Markets at Castle Hill and Penrith.

And if you wonder what to do with all that produce, visit the Harvest website for recipe ideas ([hawkesburyharvest.com.au](http://hawkesburyharvest.com.au)).

Back at Watkins Farm my daughter and I eat some mandarins before deciding on our two favourites and then pick a bucket of each. With the sweet perfume of orange blossoms filling the orchard and birds chattering in the bush, it sure beats supermarket shopping.

● The writer travelled with the assistance of Hills, Hawkesbury & Riverlands Tourism. See Briar Jensen's travel blog at [briarstravelbeat.com.au](http://briarstravelbeat.com.au)

## essentials

### GETTING THERE

The Original Hawkesbury Harvest Experience is a 60-90 minute drive from Sydney. Head towards Windsor then branch out depending on what produce you're after. If you don't want to drive yourself, tailored tours are available. See [hawkesburyharvest.com.au](http://hawkesburyharvest.com.au)

### DOING THERE

Pick up a Hawkesbury Harvest Farm Gate Trail Map or visit [hawkesburyharvest.com.au](http://hawkesburyharvest.com.au). Selected properties offer pick-your-own fruit in season or buy from roadside stalls. Opening times vary with the seasons and some farms are by appointment only, so phone ahead to avoid disappointment.

### MARKETS THERE

Hawkesbury Harvest Farmers and Fine Food Markets are held at Castle Hill Showgrounds on the second and fourth Saturday of the month (except January) and outside Penrith Library, High St, on the first Saturday of the month (except January). Both start at 8am.

### STAYING THERE

For secluded mountain cottages stay at Ghost Hill Road, Bilpin, [ghosthillroad.com.au](http://ghosthillroad.com.au) or for a relaxed family farm stay try Madisons Mountain Retreat, [madisonsretreat.com.au](http://madisonsretreat.com.au)

● More information: [hhart.com.au](http://hhart.com.au) and [hawkesburyharvest.com.au](http://hawkesburyharvest.com.au)

