



Brett Gowley and Jodie Williams outside the Black Ant Gourmet cafe-restaurant in Kin Kin

'Antsy' ambitions turning dreams to realities

By Alan Lander

WHEN Jodie Williams and Brett Gowley met each other in 2002, they quickly learned they had a shared vision for the future.

At the time, Jodie owned and ran the restaurant Bistro Bistro in Cooroy, while Brett was already an accomplished carpenter and shopfitter.

Jodie was a fifth-generation creative hospitality operator who, even before Cooroy, had made a name for herself with Noosa Marina's Trio's Restaurant in Tewantin, and many more quality eateries. "[At the time] we had a plan to do a commercial kitchen to cater for weddings, and that was going to be on a property we had in Cooroy," Jodie said.

"But things changed so we could no longer do it – and we outgrew that property anyway."

The big plan was to find a large property to farm, to supply food, to cater for weddings and functions – and eventually to provide accommodation with cabins to rent on a lake.

It took journeying through interest rate fluctuations, the global financial crisis and Covid to get there – but the dream is coming to fruition. In Kin Kin.

"Someone who was living with us asked if I'd won a million dollars, where would I live," Jodie said.

"I worked out: Australia – it's nice to visit other countries but not live there. Queensland just stood out. [Then] we thought about up north: no."

"We looked at Obi Obi, close to Montville. It was lovely, but a bit remote. Then we looked here in Kin Kin – this is where my grandparents met, and my parents met and fell in love in Pomona.

You can sit on the verandah and soak up that country atmosphere and eat locally grown and produced food."

"[So] I was attracted back to my home [area]. Kin Kin is so self-sustainable."

The pair bought a farm, and in 2013 invested in Kin Kin's old, then-defunct general store building.

"The general store was to be a rebuild; it needed demolishing. We thought it would be an asset to the town to have a café in town. There was the pub, and us," Jodie said.

Brett got stuck in to work his magic. He rebuilt the store, taking care to retain the street presence of it yet refurbishing it completely.

And in what is almost an optical illusion, at least from the street, he has established a walk-through of side-of-building seating through to a huge, converted barn facing a rear garden that can cater for weddings, functions and events.

But Kin Kin isn't really a pass-through town – and the population isn't big – so how to make the business viable on a week-to-week basis?

"We already had a successful catering company," Jodie said.

"We decided we would open the front of the store for locals, offering a variety of takeaways using the commercial kitchen out the back.

"But we soon found out the [commercial] customers we were catering for had heard we had a café in Kin Kin and just had to come out and try our food."

"We [couldn't] stop it, and it was bringing a different demographic to town – and not just to visit but to live.

"It's been wonderful to see."

And so Black Ant Gourmet was born – and hasn't looked back.

"[Black Ant] is everything: it's a pantry, a takeaway, we sell pies and quiches, we do breakfast and lunch seven days a week, and dinner once a week on Fridays," Jodie said.

"One night a week is enough," she laughed.

"Lunches are a la carte, and always have our five or six recipes that people keep coming back for, then we add a few specials that are more restaurant-style.

"We use whatever ingredients are available at the time, what's in season."

It's an eclectic mix of clientele as a result.

"It has been a delicate blend of locals, also a small element of tourism, mainly the day-trip drive market, especially with Covid, and weekenders," Jodie said.

"Visitors can stay overnight, and visit Noosa which is only a half-hour drive.

"It has definitely made a big difference. You can sit on the verandah and soak up that country atmosphere and eat locally grown and produced food."

The pair used to have a big green garden but reduced it to a time-manageable size, "but we grow our own flowers, greens, herbs, all those extra things we need."

An economic return on farming requires intense practices and huge amounts of time, Jodie said.

"We are into slow food, not intensive," she said.

"The perils of farming: margins are too tight, it's too much of a risk."

So, they now buy as much supply from surrounding local farmers and growers as possible, spreading the wealth.

"We had too many balls in the air, so we ended up sourcing from other people through the slow food movement, properly done food.

"I'll support them locally, but we still grow our own pumpkins, that sort of thing."

If you think it's just a little outpost, consider that Black Ant employs four chefs and six trainees which, added to other staff numbers, totals 18. Additionally, Jodie's daughter Tahlia is helping maintain the family tradition, and is training up as Black Ant's second-in-charge. That's a pretty big operation.

But the pair have not stopped there. As a key part of the 'big plan', Brett has designed and built Mayan Luxe Villas on their Mayan Farm land, to meet a burgeoning weekend stay and play accommodation market.

The villas are built together with complete privacy for three couples and shared facilities like a plunge pool, a fresco entertaining areas and a pizza oven and firepit, with country views that go for miles.

"The villas have rammed earth walls, each built individually, with [added] recycled timber," Brett said.

"There's no heating because there's no need: they stay warm in winter and cool in summer.

"I also built the furniture, the steel works."

Jodie said it was going to be their home which they would occasionally rent out, "but we received huge Covid demand from people who can't travel overseas."

"It's in the middle of the farm, and we only book groups – but we've already got one family now doing an annual holiday booking," she said.

"We only started in January. I thought we'd have about 40% occupancy – Brett thought maybe 60% – but it's actually running about 90%.

"We're doing a two-night minimum. We've also got approval for two cabins, and we will add another two.

"We wanted to build four cabins on the water, to cater for small boutique weddings and similar.

"It's back to that original plan we had in 2002."

But wait – there's more, as the saying goes.

The workaholic pair are now in the process of planning to build a range of demountable but add-on transportable homes for single people.

"I did an innovaton master class," Jodie said.

"My concept was 'servicing the needs of the community, sustainably', which was turnkey small units like a granny flat for efficient accommodation.

"They are affordable, modern and streamlined.

"I was planning to do them in a couple of years but with everything happening, we need to fast-track it."

Brett said he was "building two at the moment".

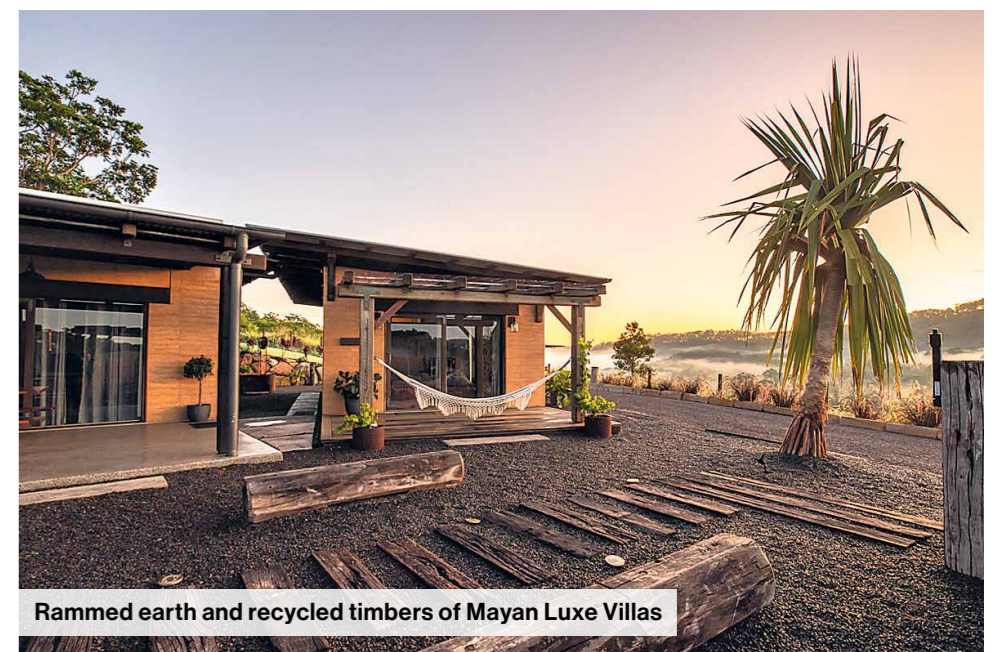
"They're compact, they open out in winter to a Queensland-friendly liveable area," he said.

"You don't have to have massive house to be comfortable, and we lack affordable housing for workers.

"You can spend \$150,000 on a site and rent out your bigger house for \$650 a week. [So even while downsizing] you can afford to stay in Noosa.



Jodie at the Black Ant counter



Rammed earth and recycled timbers of Mayan Luxe Villas

"There are lots of reasons for it to happen. We are running out of land," he said.

Jodie added that one of their biggest issues was keeping staff in a rural area – so they will also build a couple of these units for staff to rent.

"If they're renting [elsewhere] and [owners] sell, suddenly they have to find somewhere to live.

"If it ends up being, say, Nambour, they'll get work in Nambour; [the same] in Gympie.

"It can be an issue, so building for key workers, they will have more disposable income.

"And if we're setting this up for us, we can do it for other people."

Brett said the units were transportable "but not tiny homes - they don't have wheels".

"They are modern Class A or secondary dwellings.

"You can 'clip on' extra space."

Black Ant Gourmet is now taking bookings for Christmas functions.

Visit www.blackantgourmet.com.au.

For more information about Mayan Luxe Villas, visit www.mayanfarm.com.au





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