

GRAND PASSION

ACCLAIMED CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR SHANNON BENNETT IS BRINGING NEW LIFE TO AN ABANDONED HISTORIC HOME IN VICTORIA'S DANDENONG RANGES.

PHOTOGRAPHER LISA COHEN PRODUCER ANNEMARIE KIELY WRITER CARRIE HUTCHINSON

Shannon Bennett and his trainee truffle dog, MJ. Bennett trained him by wrapping bits of truffle in paper and burying them while his daughter provided a distraction. Bennett has planted 500 inoculated trees at Burnham Beeches to create the trufferie. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** the marble-ended communal benches at the Piggery Café are part of the property's restored stables and piggery. **Details, last pages.**





Shannon Bennett's first restaurant experience was in the Dandenongs. "When I was about three or four, we went for pancakes at the Cuckoo," says the award-winning chef. For those who have never ventured to the lush ranges 35 kilometres east of Melbourne, the Cuckoo Restaurant is an institution; a Bavarian chalet with a smorgasbord of German treats, and pancakes made to order, that has operated for more than five decades.

Although only a few kilometres away, Bennett's latest venture couldn't be more different. Six years ago, he was searching for a new bakery to service his Vue empire — Vue de Monde, Bistro Vue and the numerous Café Vues — when his business partner Adam Garrisson mentioned that a property in Sherbrooke was for sale. A few months later, they were the proud owners of Burnham Beeches, an abandoned 1930s streamline moderne mansion on 23 hectares of land. Designed by architect Harry Norris for pharmaceutical magnate Alfred Nicholas, it was completed in 1933 and went through various incarnations, becoming a children's hospital, a research facility and a boutique hotel, until Aman Resorts' Adrian Zecha closed its doors for the last time in the early 1990s.

"It's actually in pretty good condition," says Bennett of the three-storey house. "We're going to bring it back to its former glory. We're going to reinstate the private cinema, put a bowling alley in the basement and put the fine-dining restaurant back where it was originally."

But that is all to come. The Woods Bagot-designed hotel venture isn't expected to welcome its first guests until 2018. "The planning of the site is very complicated, but our instincts told us that you couldn't just plonk a hotel here and expect people to drive up," he explains. "You have to engage with every sector of the community. We need to get families up here, people coming for their 60th birthday, staying overnight for their anniversary. It has to have everything," says Bennett.

For five years, before a single member of the public passed through the gates, Bennett, Garrisson and a number of employees worked on their vision of a sustainable property. They planted organic vegetable gardens, established an emu farm and trufferie, and transformed an existing building into the Piggery Café and adjoining Burnham Bakery. Since June, families and couples have filled the tables, indoors and out, to feast on Wagyu burgers and chicken cooked outside on the smoky grill, soups, vegetables straight from the garden and freshly baked pastries.

Next up is a steakhouse and mini Moo Brew brewery. "It's basically an existing barn that's going to be converted, with grills powered by natural coal," says Bennett of the property's second eatery. "It will have a beautiful north-facing aspect that looks out over the truffle farm."

Bennett also plans to get a herd of Jersey cows. His dream is that locals will come to buy bread and milk, and guests might want to help out on the farm. "To make this place feasible it needs to have something for everyone, so it's a great opportunity to create a food wonderland," he says.

Piggery Café, 1 Sherbrooke Road, Sherbrooke Vic; piggerycafe.com.au.

Herbs from the garden in a pot from Koh Living. **ABOVE:** takeaway coffee and salads and pastries are baked at the adjoining Burnham Bakery. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Mattiazzi 'Solo' stools designed by Studio Nitzan Cohen sit beneath the communal benches. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** the chicken platter dish is wholesome and hearty.



PALATE



"WE'RE GOING TO BRING IT BACK TO ITS FORMER GLORY"

PALATE

Whole Snowy River rainbow trout.
RIGHT: diners in the Piggery Café below powder-coated pendant shades from HK Living. The branch hooks on the wall are from Urban Outfitters.
OPPOSITE PAGE: asparagus salad. Details, last pages.



Whole Snowy River rainbow trout

SERVES 4

4 (about 400g each) Snowy River rainbow trout, scaled, cleaned
 1 bunch fresh chamomile*
 8 large broccoli leaves (optional) fennel fronds, to garnish
 Lemon cheeks, to serve

Preheat a barbecue grill over a high heat. Using a sharp knife, cut 3 slashes in thickest part of trout on both sides. Place chamomile into cavities of trout. Season with salt.

Quickly grill broccoli leaves until just charred. Transfer to a plate. Grill trout for 4 minutes each side or until cooked through.

Arrange charred broccoli leaves on serving plates. Top with trout and garnish with fennel fronds. Serve with lemon cheeks.

*Available at specialty greengrocers and farmers' markets.

Asparagus salad

SERVES 4

16 asparagus spears
 5 slices sourdough
 100ml olive oil
 1 lemon, rind finely grated, juiced
 25g toasted walnuts
 6 slices prosciutto
 30g finely grated Parmigiano Reggiano

Using a mandolin or vegetable peeler, peel 4 asparagus spears lengthways into ribbons. Place asparagus ribbons in a bowl of iced water and stand for 30 minutes or until asparagus ribbons begin to curl.

Remove crusts from sourdough slices. Heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a large frying pan over a medium heat. Cook sourdough slices for 5 minutes or until lightly toasted. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

When cool enough to handle, tear sourdough into crouton-sized pieces.

Meanwhile, preheat a barbecue grill over a medium heat. Place remaining asparagus in a shallow dish. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon of remaining olive oil and season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Grill asparagus for 2–3 minutes or until tender and charred. Transfer to a plate.

Place lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, and whisk until well combined.

Place chargrilled asparagus on a large serving plate. Top with sourdough croutons, walnuts and prosciutto slices. Drain asparagus ribbons and pat dry with paper towel. Arrange asparagus ribbons over salad and drizzle with dressing. Sprinkle with grated parmesan and serve immediately.

Chicken platter

SERVES 4

3 sprigs rosemary, leaves removed
 3 sprigs wild garlic (ramsons)*
 1 cup olive oil
 2 chicken breast fillets
 100g Japanese mayonnaise
 100g capers, rinsed, drained, finely chopped
 broccolini sprigs, to garnish (optional)
CONFIT CHICKEN WINGS
 3 cups grapeseed oil
 1kg chicken wingettes
STUFFING
 1 loaf white bread, crusts removed, torn into small pieces
 1 ½ cups milk
 20g butter
 1 small fennel bulb, trimmed, diced
 1 brown onion, peeled, finely diced
 ½ teaspoon toasted fennel seeds
 ½ cup panko breadcrumbs
 1 egg yolk
 ¼ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley
CHICKEN NUGGETS
 20g butter
 1 small leek, trimmed, washed, diced
 1 eschalot, diced
 500g chicken breast fillet, finely minced
 2 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley

⅓ cup plain flour
 2 eggs
 2 cups fresh breadcrumbs (made from day-old bread)
 vegetable oil, to deep-fry

Place rosemary leaves, garlic and oil in a small food processor. Season with salt and process until well combined. Place chicken breasts in a shallow ceramic dish. Pour rosemary mixture over chicken and turn to coat. Cover with plastic wrap and place in refrigerator for 12 hours to develop flavours.

To make confit chicken wings, heat grapeseed oil in a saucepan over a medium heat for 3 minutes or until temperature reaches 62°C on a sugar thermometer. Transfer oil to a heatproof ceramic dish. Add wingettes and stand for 35 minutes.

To make stuffing, preheat oven to 180°C. Place bread in a bowl and just cover with milk. Stand for 10 minutes or until softened. Drain. Using your hands, squeeze bread to remove excess milk. Place in a large bowl.

Meanwhile, heat butter in a frying pan over a medium heat until melted. Cook fennel and onion for 5 minutes or until softened. Cool. Add to bread.

Place toasted fennel seeds in a mortar and pound with a pestle until crushed. Add fennel seeds, panko breadcrumbs, egg yolk and parsley. Season with salt and stir until well combined. Heat a frying pan over a medium heat. Cook breadcrumb mixture, stirring, for 10 minutes or until golden. Transfer to a baking tray. Roast in oven for 15 minutes or until crisp. Turn off oven.

To make chicken nuggets, line a small baking tray with baking paper. Melt butter in a small frying pan over a medium heat. Cook leek and eschalot for 4 minutes or until soft. Cool.

Place chicken in a large bowl. Add leek mixture and parsley, and stir until well combined. Form mince mixture into logs about 4cm thick. Place on prepared tray and place in freezer for 20 minutes or until firm.

Cut chicken logs into 5cm-long pieces. Place flour on a large plate. Whisk eggs in a bowl and place breadcrumbs in a separate bowl. Lightly coat chicken pieces in flour, shaking off excess. Dip in egg, then in breadcrumbs, pressing gently to coat.

Add enough oil to a large deep saucepan to reach a depth of 8cm. Heat to 190°C over a medium-high heat (when oil is ready, a cube of bread dropped in it will turn golden brown in 10 seconds). Add 4–5 chicken nuggets and deep-fry for 3–4 minutes or until golden and cooked through. Transfer to a tray lined with baking paper. Place in oven to keep warm. Repeat, in batches, with remaining nuggets.

Remove wingettes from grapeseed oil. Heat a frying pan over a medium heat. Cook wingettes for 3–4 minutes each side or until golden and cooked through. Transfer to a tray lined with baking paper and place in oven to keep warm.

Remove chicken breasts from marinade. Preheat a chargrill pan or barbecue grill over a medium heat. Cook chicken breasts for 3 minutes each side or until charred and cooked through. Transfer to a baking tray and place in oven to keep warm.

Combine mayonnaise and capers in a small serving bowl.

Arrange chicken nuggets, wingettes, stuffing and sliced chicken breast on a serving platter. Garnish with broccolini sprigs and serve with caper mayonnaise.

*Available at farmers' markets or substitute with garlic chives or leek. **VE+T**