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

Shannon Bennett and his 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.

PHOTOGRAPHER LISA COHEN PRODUCTION ANNE-Marie Kellea WRITER CARRIE HUTCHINSON

GRAND PASSION

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 Garrison mentioned that a property in Sherbrooke was for sale. A few months later, they were the proud owners of Burnham Bunches, 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 down 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, Garrison 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.

WE’RE GOING TO BRING IT BACK TO ITS FORMER GLORY.”
**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 10 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 on each side or until lightly toasted. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Meanwhile, peel at 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. Grill asparagus until ribbons begin to curl. Drain asparagus ribbons and pat dry with paper towel.

Drain asparagus ribbons and place in a large bowl. Add lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Add asparagus ribbons and lemon rind, rind and juice to a bowl. Add lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

**Chicken platter**

SERVES 4

3 spring rosemary, leaves removed
3 sprigs of garlic (ramsons)*
1 cup olive oil
2 chicken breast fillets

10g Japanese mayonnaise
10g capers, rimmed, drained, finely chopped
broccoli rabe, to garnish (optional)

CONFIT CHICKEN WINGS
3 cups grappased oil
3g chicken skinettes
STUFFING
1 leaf white bread, crusts removed
1/3 cup plain flour
1/3 cup fresh breadcrumbs
2 eggs

Place rosemary leaves, garlic and oil in a small food processor. Season with salt and processing 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 grappased oil in a saucepan over a medium heat for 3 minutes or until temperature reaches 60°C on a sugar thermometer. Transfer oil to a heat proof ceramic dish. Add wingettes and stand for 35 minutes. To make stuffing, 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 breadcrumb mixture, stirring, for 10 minutes or until golden and cooked through. Transfer to a tray lined with baking paper. Place in oven to keep warm.

Baste, in batches, with remaining olive oil in a jug and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Grill asparagus until ribbons begin to curl. Drain asparagus ribbons and pat dry with paper towel. Add asparagus ribbons and lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Drain asparagus ribbons and place in a large bowl. Add lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Add asparagus ribbons and lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Drain asparagus ribbons and place in a large bowl. Add lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Add asparagus ribbons and lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Drain asparagus ribbons and place in a large bowl. Add lemon rind, lemon juice and remaining olive oil in a jug. Season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.