



Melissa and David
with their sons (from left)
Nelson, Finn and Oliver.



OUR LIFE IN THE COUNTRY

THEIR WINES WIN AWARDS BUT MELISSA BOUGHEY AND DAVID BRITTEN FIND REGENERATING THE WETLAND ON THEIR WA PROPERTY EVEN MORE REWARDING.

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WHEN DAVID BRITTEN and Melissa Boughy left Perth and bought an old soldier settlement farm near Denmark, in the south-west corner of Australia, they might have chosen to begin work on the dilapidated 1920s weatherboard cottage.

Instead, the couple set about regenerating the 42-hectare property overrun with weeds — and establishing a vineyard. Local species and shrubbery reforested 10 hectares of cleared land, while fences were built to prevent cattle eroding the banks of the Kent River tributary that runs through the property. They planted orchards of heritage apples, pears, stone fruit and macadamia nuts, and vegetable patches were dug.

Seventeen years later, Moombaki is teeming with life, and Moombaki Wines has won a string of awards, including a five-star rating in James Halliday's *Australian Wine Companion*. "We've won our share of medals but we don't really chase that," David says. "Directly below our house there's a wetland — that's our pride and joy. It's now home to frogs and fish, long-neck turtles and marron — and a big colony of spoonbills that nests there every spring."

David loves early mornings, when the first rays of sunlight illuminate a valley still hazy with mist and birdsong fills the crisp air; Melissa meets a group of friends each week for walks along the spectacular coastline. A 240-hectare river reserve borders the property and the Valley of the Giants, famous for its ancient red and yellow tingle trees, are a short drive away. But not all their energies are focused outdoors: David makes beautiful furniture in his own mill, while Melissa's paintings can be seen hanging in the cellar door.

Their commitment to land regeneration hasn't wavered, despite the fact that the increasing birdlife means the vineyard must be netted each year. And they have found time to gradually renovate; their three sons — Nelson, 16, Oliver, 13, and Finn, 11 — shared a bedroom for many years before an extension was finally added. Luckily, with forests, wetlands, dams and beaches all part of their playground, the boys spent most of their time outside swimming, fishing and exploring.

David says years spent travelling overseas in his youth help him to appreciate his life at Moombaki. "I wake up every day and feel blessed to live in this part of the world. Our kids are growing up in a great environment. I don't think I'd trade it for anything."



melissa I was about halfway through my degree in Fine Arts at Curtin University in Perth when I met Dave, who was about to go off trekking in Nepal. When he came back we started taking trips down to Denmark. It was something that was right on our doorstep. We would sneak in a long weekend whenever we could. I always wanted to live in the country; I had this sense of wanting space. We just thought, "What the heck, why don't we just make a go of it and do what we want to do?" I was in my early 20s and Dave was in his early 30s. We didn't have the constraints you feel when you get a bit older and worry. As we came down the drive we both went, "Yeah!" It had that feel about it.

We had grand plans of living off the farm. But while this place did have a small breeding herd of cattle, it wasn't enough to make money from. So we thought about a business focusing on premium grapes. When you move to the country, you have to be really adaptable and open to doing a number of things, so Dave does carpentry work and I do art. I take a little book with me if I'm going walking to do sketches. I'm inspired by the wetlands and its diversity.

The vineyard work is seasonal. Dave will have three months of winter pruning to do, and I'll feel sorry for him and help for a few hours in the morning. But I've got the office work and I want time in my studio. It's a constant juggling act. >



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT Finn and David have a splash in the Kent River; Finn shows his catch of freshwater mussels; Oliver and Melissa mulching the vegetable patch; MIDDLE ROW Moombaki Wines has won a list of awards; a canoe, used mainly by the three boys, sits on the banks of a tributary that runs into the Kent River. BOTTOM ROW David made the outdoor dining table from a tree that fell in a storm; Melissa in her studio, working on a series inspired by the wetlands; Finn, Nelson and Oliver with Sox the dog. FACING PAGE Melissa and David at the Moombaki cellar door.





“THERE’S NOTHING MORE ENJOYABLE THAN SITTING DOWN AND DRINKING THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOUR.”

People will come into the cellar door from overseas or the city and ask how we live here, being so isolated. It doesn’t feel isolated when you know your community. Denmark has a lovely village feel. It can take a while to do the shopping because you’ll catch up with people on the way!

David I grew up in the wheat belt in a place called Northam, 100 kilometres east of Perth. We moved to the city when I was 12. It was that old adage, you can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy. In the school holidays I went straight back to my uncle’s or grandparents’ farm — riding horses, swimming in the river and helping with the livestock.

Melissa and I met on Australia Day, when a friend of mine was playing in a band at a hotel in Perth. We had a whirlwind romance. I spent the best part of five years travelling overseas. After my trip to Nepal I had tickets to South America. But I had a sort of epiphany. I’d met Melissa and I felt it wasn’t the right thing to do. I said to Melissa, “How about I shout you a ticket to Thailand?” She was only 19 and I was 28 so her dad wasn’t very happy that she was travelling with someone he’d never met. We’ll have our 20th anniversary next year, so everything turned out very well.

I find it therapeutic to get into the workshop to make something that’s going to be around for a lot longer than

I will. I made our dining table and benches, and worked on our renovation. I refuse to cut anything down. Every few years we get big storms and things blow over. Once they’re on the ground I have no problem milling them up.

We planted the vineyard in 1997. We were fairly green when we started. We were really lucky to meet viticulturalist Morriss Watson, who came from Melbourne to Western Australia in the early ’70s. When he arrived in Margaret River there were only three vineyards planted. He became a really good mentor. Morriss used to say to me, “There are oceans of wine out there, but there never will be a glut of premium wine, because it’s too hard to grow premium fruit.”

Most people romanticise winemaking and think we sit all day on the verandah drinking. But it’s hard work. On our first harvest Morriss said to us that in all his 50 years he’d seen fruit as good as ours, but never any better. That was a nice start. We still pick by hand. It’s such a festive occasion. The kids probably eat more than they pick, but they all help out. At the end of the day, there’s nothing more enjoyable than sitting down and drinking the fruits of your labour.

What really attracts me to living down here is that it’s such an international community. It’s culturally rich. When you come from the city, locals are a little apprehensive. If you embrace the community and get involved, you feel respected. We say we’re nearly locals now — maybe another 15 years! *