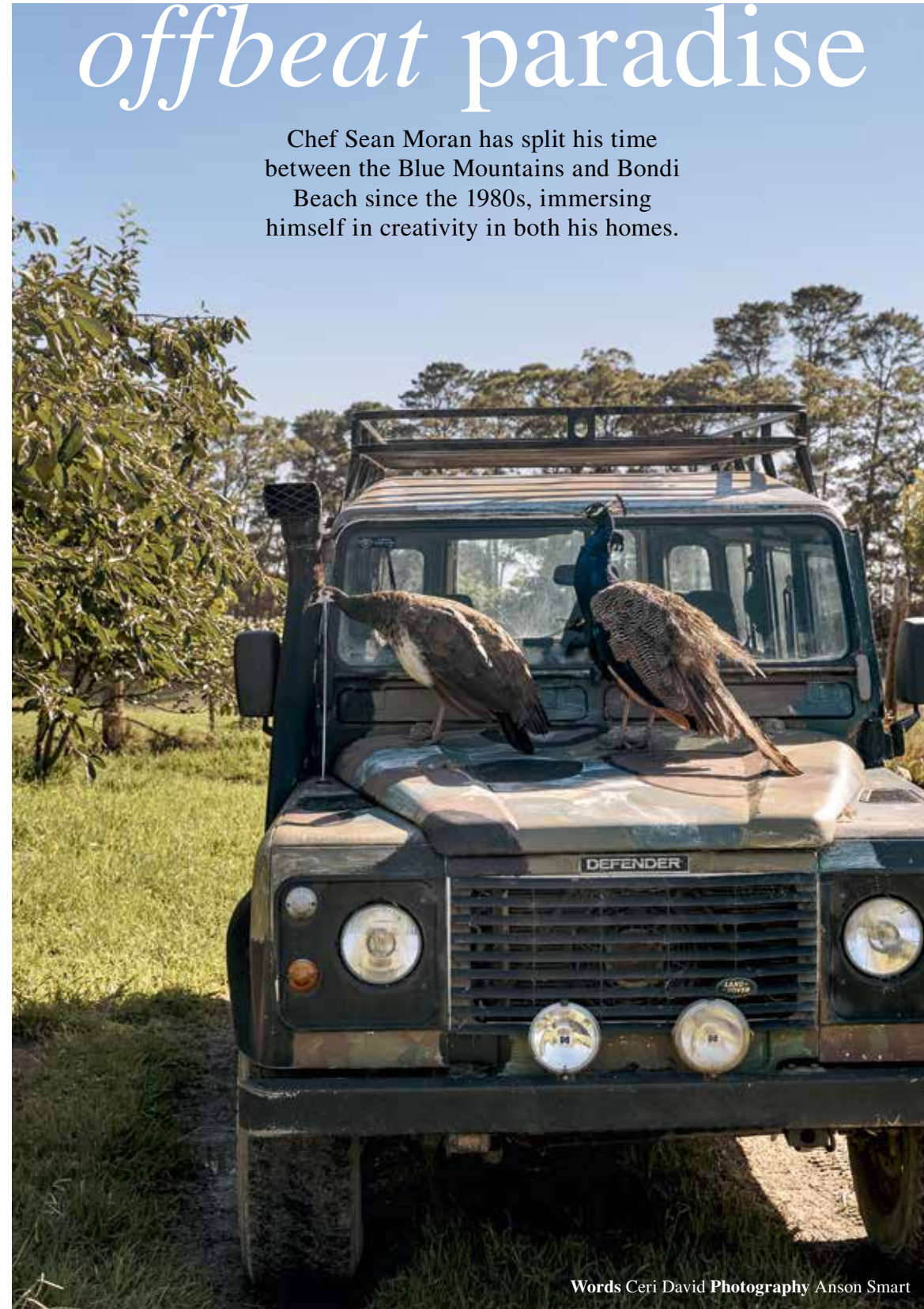


# *offbeat* paradise

Chef Sean Moran has split his time between the Blue Mountains and Bondi Beach since the 1980s, immersing himself in creativity in both his homes.



Words Ceri David Photography Anson Smart





**Below** Creativity in the kitchen (and in the paintings on the dining room walls) is Sean's realm. **Opposite page** One of the two dams, perfect for swimming in this magical setting.



‘The Bramley tree has blossom on at the moment, as well as apples,’ says Sean Moran, rolling his eyes. ‘The world doesn’t know what it’s doing.’

It’s true: the past year has forced all notions of normality to twist and tangle, to the point where, clearly, even nature is confused. Fittingly, perched at one end of the massive dining table in Sean’s Bilpin farmhouse, is an upside-down cake.

‘I picked the Bramleys this morning, cracked the walnuts, ground the cassia bark ...’ He scampers, elf-like, to the kitchen and brings back a glass jar, unscrewing the lid so I can take a sniff. ‘It’s like a grown-up version of cinnamon. Would you like some Greek yoghurt with yours?’

The 20 hectare farm in the New South Wales Blue Mountains has been home for 14 years to Sean and his husband, Michael Robertson—nicknamed Manoo ever since their young nephew had trouble with his real name. Neither of them has roots in the country. Manoo comes from a family of tinkers in the UK, while Sean is from ‘old Sydney convict stock, way back’. The couple fell in love with this part of world in the eighties, when Manoo was working at a guesthouse in Blackheath. The location

was great—just 90 kilometres north-west of Sydney, where Sean worked in Bondi—and they could have the garden they’d always wanted. They first bought a shack in nearby Mount Tomah, and two decades later they upsized to this place.

It’s unlikely the patch of dirt their younger selves dreamed of was anywhere near this size. Fields of vegetables stretch in neat rows into the distance, kept company by sheep, cows, chickens and pigs; the whole operation hydrated by two large dams—one spring-fed and overflowing joyfully into the second. All up, the farm now supplies 40 per cent of the produce used at Sean’s, the Bondi restaurant—or perhaps ‘institution’ is more accurate—they’ve had since 1993.

Sean and Manoo divide their time between the two, driving back and forth a couple of times a week with crates of produce or buckets of compost scraps, depending on the direction of travel. They haven’t always made these trips together but, lately, says Sean, they prefer to. ‘Manoo had a heart attack a couple of years ago and he says, “I don’t want to die alone”.’

Their Bondi pad is ‘this kooky, dilapidated thing that overlooks the ocean, one level above the >

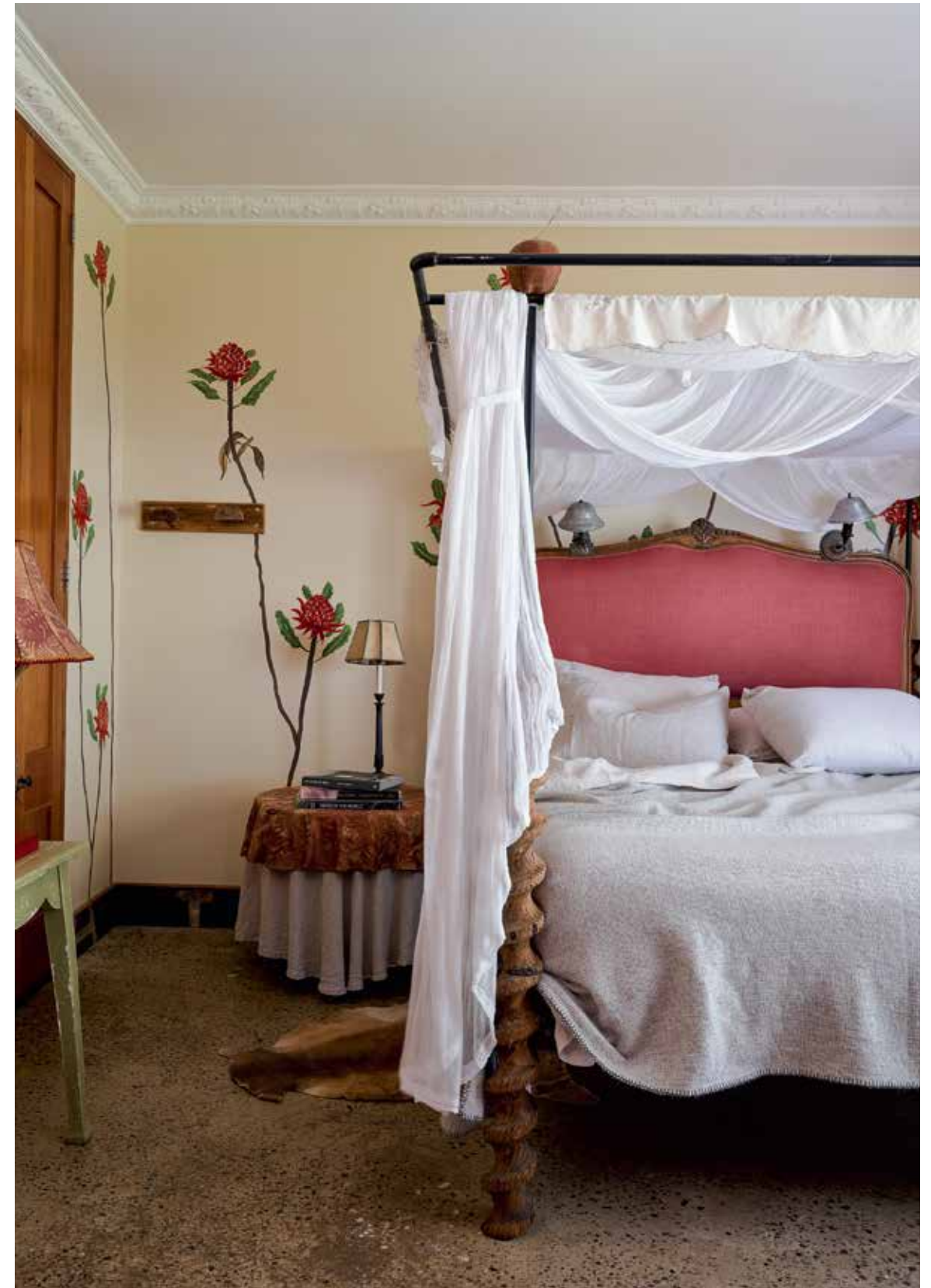




*It's a life Sean enjoys sharing,  
describing the farm as a drop-in centre.*







**Above** The waratahs in the bedroom were Sean's first attempts at decorative wall art, before he moved on to the more ambitious project of painting the vegetables in the dining room. **Opposite page** Manoo (left) and Sean.



restaurant', which gels with the vibe of the eatery below. 'We've still got a plastic bucket for a till.'

Choosing between the two halves of his existence isn't something Sean's keen to contemplate. 'My heart is torn,' he says. 'I love the coast, I love my little bunker by the sea, and it's given me this life.'

It's a life he enjoys sharing, describing the farm as a drop-in centre. Right now, his sister, Toni, who's visiting from Mullumbimby, is doing her best to distract the various dogs (they have five) that seem intent on joining our conversation. Meanwhile, Marie, a pastry chef from the Bondi restaurant, lives on the farm in an old bus, and takes care of things when the men of the house are away. 'Marie's incredible,' says Sean. 'We worked together in Italy, years ago. She's Italian and she's all about that *bella figura* thing: the notion of making a good impression. When we come back, our bed's made and there are fresh flowers. Manoo's like a teenager; he leaves crap everywhere. I'm forever tidying after him, and then Marie tidies up after both of us.'

During lockdown, the farm was also home to some of the chefs on his payroll. 'They had nowhere to go and no income. We just cooked and gardened.'

Idyllic though it sounds, it was far from stress-free, particularly during the three months when Sean's had to close. 'We thought we were going to lose the restaurant. The landlord wasn't going to budge on the rent, and we owed all this money. We'd have had to walk away. Thankfully she decided it was better to cherish the relationship we've had for so long.'

In the midst of all the uncertainty, Sean found a new outlet for his creativity, painting produce from the garden directly onto the dining room walls. 'I needed to nest. I felt like I'd lost control, and it was my way of coping.' The result hovers somewhere between the crumbling frescoes of Pompeii and a textbook of horticultural diagrams, featuring asparagus tied with string, multicoloured rhubarb, zucchini and their flowers, and many more.

Toni wanders in, hoping for a slice of cake. She's an artist, complete with paint-flecked trousers. Is she impressed by her brother's *oeuvre de la terre*?

'I actually think Sean is an artist: he's more creative than me, with everything he touches,' she insists. 'This is the first time he's painted, and it's amazing. I told him he's not allowed. Painting's my thing.'

Sean interrupts: 'Well, don't look behind that cabinet. I made sure that's where my ugly things are.'

Clumps of spinach. How do you paint that? It's just all fuckin' green.'

It turns out the project began with a mural of rich red waratahs in one of the bedrooms. (Their bedroom? 'It depends; we move around. At the moment it is.') Pleased with the result, he graduated to vegetables, starting with the boldest of all: beetroot. 'It was what we harvested that day, so that's what we were having for dinner.'

To be clear, in most homes, this would be a categorically bad idea. Here, it's just one of countless treasures to feast your eyes on. The pantry looks like a historical timeline of food processors, owned and operated exclusively by Sean. Manoo doesn't cook, at home or at work; his role in hospitality has always been on the business side of things—including running the High Hopes Roadhouse they recently opened here in Bilpin. 'When I'm not here, he'll have cheese on toast for dinner,' says Sean. 'And when I am, he's a tricky customer. No coriander, no chilli, no skin, no bones. It drives him nuts that my freezer's full of chicken carcasses. I save them up until I can make a big pot of stock when I've got enough.'

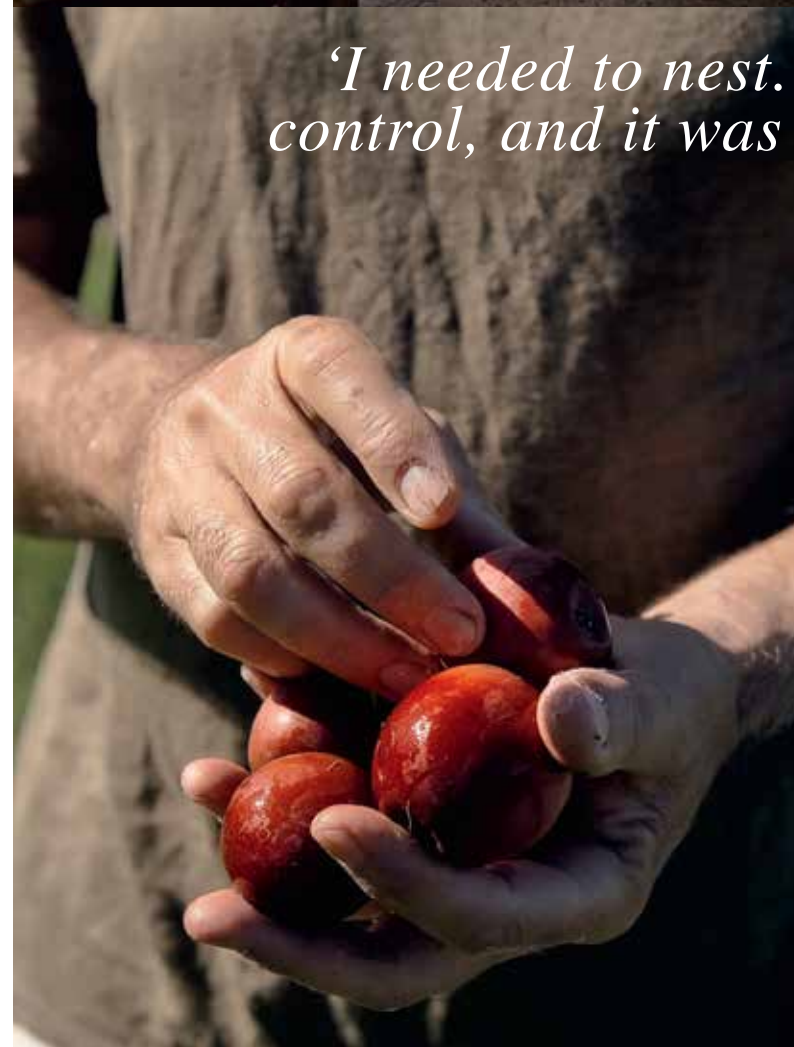
How many are in there now? 'Probably a couple of dozen.'

Possibly not the nicest surprise for someone just hoping for a tub of Ben & Jerry's, but it gets worse. 'I once had that kingfisher in the freezer.' He's pointing towards a glass cabinet. 'It flew into the window. And that fox. It was trying to get the chickens, and Manoo shot it, by fluke. I froze them until I could take them to the taxidermist.'

Outdoors, the farm is just as magical. There's the jetty that Sean and Manoo dive off into the deep water of the dam. The Smyrna quince tree that sweats its fragrance onto your fingers when you touch its fruit. The ram, who won't go anywhere without his alpaca best friend.

Then there's the bed on the verandah. Fully made up with sheets and pillows, it was transplanted from one of the bedrooms, and now lounges under the tin roof, shrouded in a puff of mosquito netting. Their old friends Den and Sheila were the inspiration. 'They had a place out at Ilford, and they slept every night outside,' explains Sean. 'Even in the snow, they just put more blankets and a beanie on. I love that romance. It just made your heart sing.'

Standing here in this offbeat slice of paradise, high in the mountains, I know exactly what he means. ■



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