

Creative central

Janet Jeffs and Leanne Crisp pursue their passions for the culinary and visual arts from their beautiful Braidwood farm.

BY KIRSTY MCKENZIE, PHOTOGRAPHY KEN BRASS





A deep connection to the land has always informed the work of Canberra chef Janet Jeffs and her partner, artist Leanne Crisp. Ballalaba, their farm in the upper reaches of the Shoalhaven River in the NSW south-western slopes, allows them to take their endeavours to new heights.

Although they both grew up in Adelaide and studied art there (briefly in Janet's case), the couple lived in parallel worlds until fate brought them together a decade ago. "I married at 21 and came to Canberra in 1975, where I raised my family," Leanne says. "Janet was on the edge of my circle of friends so I was always aware of her, even as early as the '90s. Our relationship developed from that friendship and I moved to Ballalaba about six years ago."

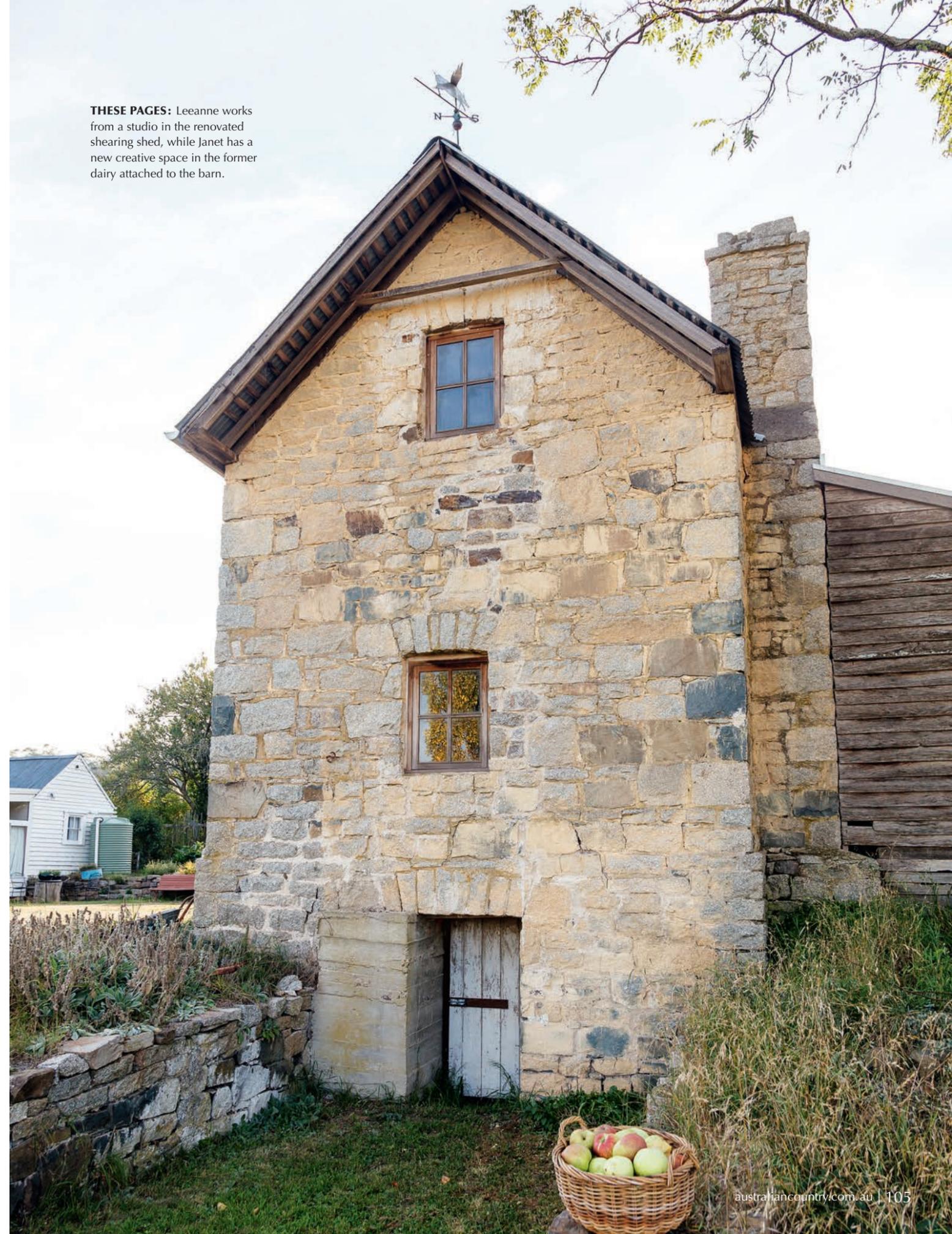
Sustainability is Janet's natural default. She grew up in South Australia and completed an apprenticeship under chef Cheong Liew, who, in the 1970s and '80s, had revolutionised Australian dining by giving it an Asian accent and introduced European-schooled diners to the concept of nose-to-tail eating long before it entered the vernacular. From there, Janet went on to push the seasonal, local barrow by working for the Barossa Valley's chief cook and advocate, Maggie Beer, at the legendary Pheasant Farm restaurant.

She then opened her first restaurant, Kilikanoon in the Clare Valley in 1985 and



The Origin of All Things

THESE PAGES: Leeanne works from a studio in the renovated shearing shed, while Janet has a new creative space in the former dairy attached to the barn.





it quickly became a beacon on the country culinary map. Janet moved to Canberra in 1995 where she established the fine diner, Juniperberry. She branched out in 2000, moving Juniperberry to the National Gallery of Australia, then establishing Ginger Catering and The Ginger Room at Old Parliament House. Ginger Catering is now based at the National Arboretum, where Janet is executive chef of Sprout Cafe and The Conservatory Restaurant.

Janet's passion for all things seasonal and local reached its apotheosis in 2007 when she bought Ballalaba. She discovered the property had been owned in the 1950s by the Mackay family, who were early adopters of Rudolf Steiner's principles of biodynamics. Their friend, Brian Kears, was also resident on the farm when he compiled the pivotal astro calendar planting guide. Janet continues the farm's tradition by breeding Dexter cattle with minimal intervention and using biodynamic preparations in the orchard and vegetable gardens. "We don't use any chemicals, so we are effectively organic," she says. "We used to have pigs as well but they are escape artists."

THESE PAGES: The barn was constructed during the 1830s and the homestead began life in the 1860s as a four-room cottage with a detached kitchen at the back.





THESE PAGES: Leeanne and Janet are able to pursue their artistic endeavours from their home base at the upper reaches of the Shoalhaven.



Immanence

We decided they had to go when a mob of adolescent pigs busted out and destroyed a wonderful crop of corn we were nurturing.” Ballalaba beef, apples from the heirloom orchard and salad ingredients and vegetables from the garden often make their way onto the menu at Arboretum. When *Australian Country* visited, Janet had recently planted a grove of 60 walnut trees, though she candidly admits they’re “for the next generation of owners” as it will take years for them to be fully productive.

Leeanne’s father grew up on a farm and her mother came from rural Victoria and their legacy is that she’s always been a keen gardener. She studied art and teaching in Adelaide and has a long career as both a practising and teaching artist. Her paintings are represented in many galleries including the National Portrait Gallery and the National Library of Australia and she’s a veteran of eight solo exhibitions and more than 60 group exhibitions.





THESE PAGES: Leeanne's works are displayed throughout the home. Janet's studio is in a stable beside the convict-built stone barn.

"My work explores images of the female body as a lived and felt reality," Leeanne explains. "I combine this with images from the natural world, earth, air, fire and water and the energies, such as generative forces, that surround us. While I've always been influenced by the natural world, it has been profoundly affected by living on the farm. We have the most spectacular views from the property and you witness the cycle of life and death through the seasons. In winter, the landscape is silver and in summer, it's gold. The whole valley is spread out before us and we can see the weather coming in and the clouds rolling in from the coast, which is only 50 kilometres away. It's extremely peaceful and I doubt I could live in the suburbs now. It's a wonderful place to work as it's so quiet and the only distractions are gardening, weeding and the cattle. However, you do need to be jolted out of this cosy cocoon from time to time."

Leeanne and Janet keep an apartment in a quiet part of the Canberra suburb of Griffith. "Leeanne needs the stimulus of the art world and we both love attending musical events," Janet explains. "I manage the Arboretum work from there Tuesday to Thursday and then head to the farm Friday to Monday. I like to think I've done my succession planning well as my former apprentice, Marie Koenig, is now the head chef. She runs the kitchen beautifully and has everything under control."

This has freed Janet up to pursue what she calls her "plan B": studying visual arts with a focus on sculpture. "I've always been interested in art and even started an art course before I did my apprenticeship," she says. "I dabbled in ceramics through Canberra Potters, but in recent years I decided I wanted to take it more seriously. So I did a one-year course to test how I could manage full-time study before I committed to my current three-year course."

Ballalaba has significant colonial history, complete with a barn built from local stone in the 1830s by 14 convicts assigned to the original landholder, Thomas Cowper, whose father came to the colony as an Anglican minister, while his brother, Charles, went on to serve as Premier of NSW at various times between 1856 and 1870.





When Thomas became insolvent in 1843, Ballalaba was bought by another local leading light, Thomas Molyneux Royds. He, in turn, earned his place in the history books as the breeder of horse Archer, the winner of the first two Melbourne Cups in 1861 and '62. Although it's a matter of conjecture, local lore has it that Archer was foaled in the stable adjacent to the barn. What is fact is that Thomas Royds was only 28 when he was killed in a horse-riding accident. Two years later, his wife, Elizabeth, married Rowland Hassall, who took over Royds' stable of horses and in conjunction with Elizabeth's brother, Tom Roberts, managed the horses for her young sons, Edmund Molyneux and William Edward Royds. Only adding to the confusion over who actually owned Archer is the side note that the legendary racehorse was leased to another Braidwood local, trainer and jockey Etienne de Mestre, at the time of his Cup feats. Ballalaba also has its share of swashbuckle as the stamping ground of the bushranging Clarke family, who alternately terrorised and took up residence with local landholders.

The Ballalaba homestead was built in 1860 with four rooms at the front and two at the back, which were most likely staff quarters and a kitchen. There was a well between the two buildings, which were later connected to form what is now Janet and Leeanne's living room. To accommodate her growing artistic endeavours, Janet has built a studio in the stable beside the barn and, at the time of our visit, was working on a sculpture of a Minotaur with a strong feminist theme. Meanwhile, Leeanne has a vast space to call her own, in the refurbished shearing shed a few hundred metres away.

Before its conversion, the kindest description Leanne can muster for the shed is that it was "a dump". "We took up all the sheep grating and repurposed it as floorboards, though we aligned them so you can still see where the pens were," she says. "We removed the tin from the outside and recoated it, then lined the interiors to make the space more comfortable in the heat and cold. We put in windows and a deck along the front, but you can still see it's a shed."

THESE PAGES: The property supports an heirloom orchard, Dexter cattle and a veggie garden.

"I don't see the point of gutting a building," Janet adds. "I prefer to preserve its integrity by keeping as much of the original as possible."

Now that the job is complete, Leeanne finally has space to spread out her work, much of which is done on the floor, not to mention display it in the space it deserves. Some of The Ginger Room from Old Parliament House has also been recycled into the interior. The former bar is now storage, while a screen and couches have also settled happily into the renovation. There is a pervading sense that in these new areas both women have space to reach their fullest potential.

"I've always taught at art school," Leeanne says. "When you're around young people, you don't think about ageing. In any case, I don't much see the point of putting people in a box. A lot of women of my age are just coming into their own in terms of their careers. Janet will always succeed at whatever she turns her hand to. She is fiercely determined and has a lot of inner resources and strength. She is willing to try things that most people would find daunting. She was always interested in art so, when we got together, it was natural that she would become more involved in my world. I see cheffing as a performance art and now the conversations we have feed into both our practices. We both understand that you just don't get up and produce a work of art. It's something you develop and work towards. And we're lucky that living at Ballalaba allows us to achieve that." **AC**

