

# Paddock to plate

SANDY LEATHAM MAKES AN ARRAY OF DELICIOUS PIES, CONDIMENTS, SAUSAGES AND READY-TO-COOK MEALS IN HER OLD-FASHIONED SHOP IN BENALLA, VIC, WITH ALL MEAT SOURCED FROM HER NEARBY FAMILY FARM.

STORY SHERIDAN ROGERS PHOTOS JAMIE DURRANT

IT'S 8AM on a Friday at Hook and Spoon in Benalla, in north-eastern Victoria, and there are six stockpots on the go and an oven full of delicious chunky beef pies. Owner/cook Sandy Leatham has already been here for the past couple of hours preparing for the upcoming Great Aussie Pie Competition, and for the Farmers' Market, held every second Saturday in Albury-Wodonga.

The pies today are all beef – beef burgundy; beef, stout and mushrooms; beef, fig and lemon – and the stockpots are full of roasted beef bones, which have been painted with tomato paste to add depth of flavour. Sandy also bakes mutton pies – she has an award-winning mutton, caraway and roast-pumpkin pie – and pork pies. The latter are made with a traditional hot water crust, using lard; and the beef and mutton with proper shortcrust.

"I make the shortcrust with butter and flour, then roll it out into foil containers and freeze them overnight," she says, her brown eyes twinkling. "The filling is made ahead and refrigerated, because I find it doesn't bubble over the sides if you do it this way.

Baking pies is just so satisfying." The 50-something Sandy opened Hook and Spoon two years ago and has attracted a loyal band of followers. All the meat for the business comes from the family farm "Flat Hill", a 240-hectare property in the foothills of the Strathbogies where they run cattle and sheep.

"Our farming practices are very clean and green and include light stocking rates so as not to stress the land and enable us to finish the stock on pasture, not grain," Sandy says. "We run various crosses of Santa Gertrudis, Devon, Angus and Red Angus, all hardy and low maintenance. The sheep are Merino, which produces old-fashioned flavoursome mutton."

But the key to Sandy's success is that the beef is hung for 21–28 days and the mutton for 12 days. "The hanging process tenderises and also intensifies the flavour," she says. "You'll notice that when you cook a long-hung steak, it will cook more quickly and won't shrink as much as a standard steak, and the meat is more juicy and the flavour stronger."

Apart from her hearty pies and cuts of vacuum-packed dry-aged meat, Sandy sells boutique sausages and condiments plus a range of ready-to-cook meals including beef lasagne, vegetarian lasagne, Irish stew, beef stroganoff, a farmhouse pot and a pot roast. Old-fashioned puddings such as creamy sago with mulled pears and dark gingerbread, bread-and-butter pudding and lemon-syrup pudding are also on the take-home menu.

Sandy grew up on a dairy farm near Hobart. In her early twenties she undertook a hotel-management course, then worked in some of Hobart's best restaurants and set up a catering business.

"I then married, had four children and breastfed for 12 years," she says with a smile. "We couldn't afford much in those days, so I'd churn the butter and make cheese for the family."

Nine years ago, the family moved to Flat Hill. She and her husband have since separated and she now lives in Benalla. Neighbours and children help with the stock work on the farm.

"I'm really passionate about the shop," she says. "The building inspired me to go back into catering. It's 120 years old and the interior is fitted out with creamy wall-to-ceiling tiles with a beautifully detailed frieze, pressed tin ceiling and parquetry floors." Her enthusiasm is infectious – you see it at once in her soft round face, along with her dedication to quality wholesome food and to forging a life of her own.

## HOOK AND SPOON

Meat and meals.  
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### MORROCCAN MUTTON

1.5kg diced mutton  
tossed in 1/2 tablespoons flour (wheat or corn)  
then fry in 3 tbs olive oil  
put all this into a casserole dish or slow cooker

Then, brown these with a little extra oil if needed:

2 medium onions, sliced

2 green peppers, de-seeded, sliced

Add to the pan and saute:

2 carrots, peeled & cut into half moons

250g rich orange-coloured pumpkin

Put all that into the pot with the meat then add these

and bring to a very gentle simmer:

420ml stock (made up veggie if you haven't any of your own fresh meat stock)

1 tbs very finely grated fresh root ginger

1 tsp ground ginger

2 large pinches of saffron soaked in a little warm water and crushed in a pestle & mortar

170g dried apricots, chopped

2 tbs lemon juice

seasoning

Cook for 3 hours at low temperature, 150 degrees

Celsius with lid on in the oven or put your slow cooker

on low for 4-6 hours. Serve hot with mashed potatoes

or with rice or couscous, or use as a pie filling.



CLOCKWISE: The charming interior of Benalla's Hook and Spoon; cook Sandy Leatham; meat is hung to tenderise and intensify flavour; one of Sandy's amazing pies.

