



MY TOWN

ROCK—HAMPTON



It's the land of beef, barras and Bundy rum. But Rocky residents have a taste for the finer things, too, from citrus-infused gin to smoky bacon snags from Queensland's Sausage King. **Susan Horsburgh** finds out what the locals love about their city. Photography by Josh Cunliffe.





REGGIE BROOK

BUTCHER

"I was named Queensland Sausage King at the Ekka [Royal Queensland Show] last year. My beef and cracked pepper was the winning sausage – it topped the Gourmet/Open category. The competition starts off at a regional level then you progress to the state and national titles. There's a panel of judges and one guy who does all the cooking – he takes the same barbecue with him all over Australia.

I have the trophy on my counter. My business, Parkhurst Quality Meats, was brand-new so it gave me a bit of credibility. My parents owned two butcher shops and I've been a butcher for 17 years. I just love my job; the customer interaction is great and there's a real community feel here in the suburb of Parkhurst.

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Cooking shows have done wonders for butchers because they put ideas into people's heads. Customers come in asking for secondary cuts they can't get at the supermarket, things like oxtail and lamb brains. Steak and three veg is sort of a thing of the past – butchering is making a comeback. People come down and say, 'Righto, Reggie, I'm having a barbecue. Can you give us some recommendations?'

I'm born and bred Rocky, I've lived here my whole life. I moved to Brisbane for a year then came home – Brisbane didn't cut it. Rocky is a good place to be a butcher. We've got the Beef Australia expo this year [6-12 May] and that brings in people from all over the world. It's massive. People really struggle to find accommodation. If they haven't got anything organised, they're probably going to be sleeping in their car. I'm hoping to get a few of the high rollers – some of the good cattle producers – to come and have a look at my shop.

I'm predominately known for my sausages now; we sell up to a thousand kilos a week. Our smoky bacon and maple, as well as our pork, caramel and pecan, are the big sellers. Vegemite and cheese is also really popular. I've got two butchers and an apprentice and we throw around ideas, see what's trending and what flavours people want. We made pork and banana sausages once and they were absolutely terrible. We gave them to a couple of good customers and they were just like, 'Yeah, nah, don't sell 'em.'"



KRYSTAL CATON

LYCHEE FARMER

"My husband, Paul, and I bought Lush Lychees two years ago. We were managing an organic cattle property just north of Rockhampton and after 10 years of that, we wanted to venture into something of our own but a cattle property was a bit out of our reach.

The lychee orchard is 16 hectares and has 5000 trees on it. In our first season, we had more than 50 staff members to pick the fruit and we pulled off about 65 tonnes, which is quite an achievement. Luckily for us, peak picking time is in the Christmas school holidays when our local meatworks shuts down. A lot of the employees are looking for work so they help us pick lychees and they love it.

We didn't get as much fruit in our second season but they say lychees are a biennial crop: you'll have one really good year and a lighter one the next. The Brisbane and Sydney markets are our main ones but the lychees also go to New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Lychees are so complicated and needy. If you don't do everything right, they just won't give you flowers and you won't get any fruit. They're only available once a year; on our farm, that's around Christmas and the new year. They like a cool winter without frost and a really warm, moist summer so Rockhampton is perfect.

A lot of people say, 'What are lychees?' I guess they're not a well-known fruit. They are in Asian cultures because they originated in China. They're sweet and juicy and grape-like. Fresh is best but I have attempted some lychee chutneys and I've got a team working on some lychee liqueurs.

Rockhampton is a great area for agriculture because we've got the Fitzroy River. And it's not just about beef: Yeppoon, 40 kilometres east, has great pineapples and there are other lychee farms and a macadamia farm in the region.

We have a major airport here and the Singaporean army flies in and trains nearby. But it doesn't seem like a city: there's room for growth and Rocky is very affordable for families. It has that country feel that we like but you can come to town and feel like you're not out in the sticks."



MADONNA BOODLE

FASHION JUDGE

"My husband, Pete, and I raised our five girls in Rockhampton. We're very social people; we were into horseracing – we owned horses – and all the kids were sporty. I grew up here and my father also had good racehorses. We were high profile, we were doers. Pete got onto the board at the Rockhampton Jockey Club and became chairman.

Our major races are in autumn and winter. There's the Rocky Amateurs, the Girls Grammar Rockhampton Race Day and the Rockhampton Cup Race Day, which is the biggest fashion event.

I started competing in Fashions on the Field in 1996. I always made the finals and five years in, I started to win. I love the adrenaline and the beauty of it. Walking onto that stage, thinking you're drop-dead gorgeous, it helped me find myself. Before that, I was a very shy, laid-back country woman.

I've done some crazy things with my hats and outfits – and they've won. I once wore a beautiful aqua-blue and chocolate thimble-shaped hat with a big satin bow. When I walked in, I knew I was going to smash it because everyone turned around and said, 'Oh my God, that looks so beautiful! But look at the hat – it's crazy!'

I started judging the competition in 2013. What makes a winning outfit? The person in it. It's about deportment, being a lady and having something different. I wouldn't even look at you if you had a short skirt on. And I wouldn't entertain a strapless dress or spaghetti straps. It's tricky dressing up in the Rocky heat but the women can do it and they do it beautifully. We suffer for fashion.

Last year I retired from the competitions. I've had my heyday and I don't want to go back. Put it this way: imagine bringing back Black Caviar – you wouldn't do it. She's had it, she's done it, she's proven it. That's it."

MICHELLE BLACK

ARTIST

"Printmaking is a very process-driven art form. The ink has this amazing linseed-oil smell and you can hear it crackling when you use the roller. It's so meditative – I just got hooked on it.

When I moved here it felt a little bit like a cultural vacuum but the art scene is growing and there's a lot of excitement among local artists. In 2011, we formed the Capricornia Printmakers group and we have a studio at the Walter Reid Cultural Centre, a gorgeous old sandstone warehouse.

I'll be exhibiting there with other artists during Beef Australia. The works are inspired by local-history books; mine focuses on the Fitzroy River. Riverside development is forcing everybody to remember that there's a lovely river here. But it has a chequered history with lots of flooding, the big one being 100 years ago. I've been digging up mud from the river to put in my prints.

I've lived here for 11 years and seen three pretty big floods in that time – the water comes up into the streets and people at Depot Hill have to use boats to get to and from their houses. But it's never raining when it floods here – it's always a beautiful blue-sky day – because it takes days for the water to come down the rivers and reach Rockhampton.

The natural environment here is incredible; there's Mount Archer, just out of town, and the Capricorn Coast, 40 kilometres north-east. It's spectacular out there and nobody knows about it. I like to sit on the beach at Emu Park.

I love it here because it's safe for the kids – I can send them off to do things and not worry about them. It's like they're growing up the way I did."





ZAC GARVEN

TOURISM ADVOCATE

"The Fitzroy River is our city's greatest asset. It runs right through the middle of Rockhampton and it's the second-largest freshwater catchment system in Australia. You can pull metre-long barramundi out of it every day of the week.

We've got clean air, clean water and lots of nature. There are so many mountains and hills with hiking paths and lookouts, the riverfront is gorgeous and there's a big dam up at Mount Morgan, 40 kilometres south of town.

On the cultural side, Rockhampton Art Gallery has the most significant collection of Australian Modernist paintings in regional Queensland. And the Pilbeam Theatre has good local productions.

All my family is here in Rockhampton. I love the weather and the cost of living is great. So are the people; you get some classic personalities. There's no traffic and everything is accessible – the bush, the city, the river, the beach, the Keppel Bay Islands – and Brisbane is just over an hour's flight away.

The state minister for tourism, Kate Jones, recently appointed me a Young Tourism Leader, a role that's about inspiring the next generation to join the industry. I work for two of the region's leading apartment-style hotels – The Edge and Empire, both in Rockhampton – and my official title is marketing and business-development manager. It's my job to promote the hotels and Rockhampton as a destination. I'm just an unofficial ambassador for anything that's happening in town. If you don't support these things, they don't come back.

I also host pop-up dinners around the region with local chef Roel Van Camp – that comes from my passion for food and having mates who are fantastic cooks. We call the dinners Amuse and the focus is on local produce. We've done 14 in the last year and the biggest was for 30 people.

If friends come to visit, I take them to the top of Mount Archer to look out at the city while the sun sets. Then we go to dinner somewhere and have a drink – there are lots of little bars around. All my friends who come say they like the people here. It's a really welcoming community – sometimes I feel like the bigger the city, the lonelier it is."



WARREN BREWER

DISTILLER

"I grew up in Rocky but I left after high school and was gone for 19 years. I had ambitions of joining a non-government organisation and helping the world but instead I moved to Sydney and worked in corporate banking for 10 years. Two years ago, my wife, Catherine, and I quit our jobs and bought a caravan. We planned to travel around Australia for a year before our kids started school.

We took four months to get up to Rockhampton and we were going to stay with my parents for six weeks. Then we saw that the Saleyards Hotel was for sale. It's been a hotel since 1881 and it's a bit of a landmark because you see it as you come into town. It burned down in 1930 and was rebuilt in 1931 so it's in that Art Deco style. We'd been thinking about starting a distillery for about five years. We couldn't make it work in Sydney but the price of property up here made it easier to start out. I feel like I'm living my dream.

At Saleyards Distillery, we make three types of gin and two rums. Our Billy Goat's Gin is designed around the climate: because it's hot, we wanted to make something refreshing – the citrus and floral flavours give it a real punch. For Beef Australia, we've got six craft distilleries from around the state coming to Saleyards to showcase their gin, rum, whisky, liqueurs and vodka. You can make a lot of different flavours and styles of spirits – people just don't know that because mainstream spirits are very similar to each other.

Rockhampton has changed a lot. 'Cosmopolitan' isn't the right word – it hasn't reached those heights yet – but people are more discerning than they used to be and there are more interesting things to do. Everything's easy here and because people don't spend an hour driving to work every day, they have plenty of time for everybody. People have manners – it's a bit like stepping back in time.

Rockhampton has an older, masculine sort of feel to it. The beef farmers and miners are quite blokey and I'd say 50 per cent of women drink rum. It really is the heart of rum country." ●