



free-range
FAMILY

THIS COUPLE LEFT LONDON TO FIND A NEW HOME NEAR MUDGEE WHERE A FAMILY — AND A HERD OF BERKSHIRE PIGS — COULD LIVE A NATURAL LIFE, FAR FROM STRESS.

WORDS **ALI GRIPPER** PHOTOGRAPHY **SAM McADAM**

James Caspar and his four-year-old daughter Emily — feed time at the troughs. **FACING PAGE** The pigs at Ormiston are free to socialise.



Come and get it — James feeding the herd. RIGHT Some of Ormiston's piglets. BELOW The Caspar family: Georgie, Emily, Felix and James.



GEORGIE CASPAR TRUDGES to the top paddock of her free-range pig farm in the hills south of Mudgee, in NSW's Central West, clutching a bucket loaded with chunks of vegetable marrow.

In the fierce midday heat, she passes a stand of pine trees that form a pleasant oasis for a small group of Berkshire pigs wallowing in shallow ditches of mud. Next come the farrowing paddocks, studded with timber huts that serve as birthing pens for the 20 sows on the farm. Finally she stops under a giant, 100-year-old gum tree near the top of a hill.

"Hi Britney! Hi Harriet, hi Beverley! How are you?" she calls. Ten sows and piglets are resting in the shade. "Come on, Dotty, come and have a cuddle!" she says, throwing the marrow snack on to the grass. A large sow heaves herself out of her comfortable spot and approaches laboriously.

"Pigs are really nice animals," Georgie says, leaning down and giving Dorothy a rub on the belly. "They're affectionate and curious, sociable and intelligent. To me, this is how they should live. It doesn't make sense for them to be confined."

What 37-year-old Georgie, who has worked as an animal behaviourist, is referring to is the way many commercial piggeries keep animals in stalls so small they can't even turn around. The pigs' eyeteeth are

often removed, she says, because they become aggressive in such a stressful environment.

Although the pigs at Ormiston Free Range Pork still go to market — about five pigs, aged five to seven months, are sent to the abattoir each week — they live a longer, almost idyllic life. They're free to graze, wallow, socialise and sleep all over the property's 65 hectares of grassland, pine and gum forests. They're fed twice daily on a diet that includes grains and vegetables, with no antibiotics or hormones added to their rations.

"I think stress definitely has an effect on taste," Georgie says. "Our main aim is to reduce stress as much as possible... the pigs have a weigh-in every week here so that when they go to the abattoir they are not frightened even when they're handled."

In Sydney, the pork is sold at the Good Living Growers' Market in Pymont and The Village Providores in Annandale. It is also sold at farmer's markets around NSW's Central West.

For Georgie, who grew up in Sydney, and her 39-year-old husband James, a British vet, the move to Mudgee was a welcome relief from the pace, and price, of living in London.

"It's been a very steep learning curve as neither of us had ever run a farm before," James says. "But it's absolutely wonderful waking up here and walking through the fields instead of battling through the morning traffic of London. Once we decided to have a family [the couple have two children, five-year-old Felix and four-year-old Emily], we wanted somewhere a lot easier to bring them up. The hardest part was choosing which country town to settle in: there were so many we could see ourselves living in happily."

"We chose Mudgee because it was close enough to Sydney, it was pretty, and it was the right size." James established a new veterinary practice in Mudgee, and soon after they settled in the area in July 2007, the idea of the free-range piggery took hold.

"Free-range farms are much more prevalent in the UK — and when you're coming from another country, you're not bound by preconceptions about what is and isn't possible," James says.

"There's been a really big shift in the UK towards organic food. And that's starting to build in Australia now, too... but the most satisfying part of running this farm is selling pork from animals that you know have had a good life."*



ABOVE There's plenty of space for pets on the farm, including a friend's Shetland pony. BELOW Open grassland and gum forest on the property.

