

# Paradise for PIGS



## COMPASSION LEADS TO SUPERIOR QUALITY AND TASTE, ACCORDING TO NSW FREE-RANGE PIG FARMERS JAMES AND GEORGIE CASPAR.

words KIRSTY MCKENZIE photography KEN BRASS

**So what is it that truly makes pigs happy? According to Mudgee farmers James and Georgie Caspar, it really is just like the old saying: a nice big slushy mud pit to wallow in. Plus room to roam about in, ground to dig in, trees to nest in or huts to farrow in and the freedom to be cool or warm.**

"Basically, a happy pig is a pig that's free to express its natural behaviours," says Georgie, who has a Masters degree in animal behaviour to support her claim. The Caspars are trying to create the perfect environment for the pigs that supply their business, Ormiston Free Range Pork, on their 170-acre farm on the outskirts of Mudgee in the wine region of central western NSW.

James worked as a vet in his home country, England, and met Georgie

when she joined his practice in Southampton. Initially, they thought of opening a veterinary practice in Australia, which they would time share with James' English business partner. That way, James and Georgie would spend half their year in each of their home countries. "We knew we wanted a lifestyle change," Georgie explains. "Our lives were hectic and we weren't spending as much time with the children as we wanted. So we thought we'd divide our time between Australia and the UK."

However, after one commuting stint with their children Felix, now five, and Emily, four, they decided to move permanently to Australia. In the process of looking at vet practices to buy, they'd spent a lot of time in country NSW and by accident stayed a night in Mudgee. "We sensed

**Clockwise from top left:** James Caspar, who has gone from English veterinarian to Australian pig farmer, with a beautiful black Berkshire; with wife Georgie, an animal behaviourist and children Emily, 4, and Felix, 5, with some of their herd; the Ormiston brand logo says it all.



immediately that it was a very open, dynamic town with a lot of people interested in food and wine," James says. "For a town of 10,000, it punches well above its weight."

As luck would have it, a farm was for sale and, before they knew it James and Georgie were the proud new owners. "Neither of us is particularly horticultural, so it made sense for us to stick to animals," Georgie explains. "James is passionate about good pork sausages and we both care deeply about eating meat responsibly and animal health and welfare, so it seemed obvious that we would become pig farmers."

The Caspars say Australia lags behind the UK, where more than half of pig production is free range. They estimate that maybe 2 per cent of pork production in Australia is free range. "When we joined the Free Range Pork Association of Australia, we were the seventh members," Georgie says. "And some of those growers only have a couple of pigs. We have also chosen to ally ourselves

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and babies. This seems to reflect the more natural family groups that you see in the wild.

"At eight to 10 weeks, they are weaned and moved into a large paddock with other youngsters. Intensively farmed pigs are slaughtered at about 15 weeks but, because ours run around more, they grow more slowly and therefore develop better flavour. They go to the abattoir at about six months. The mum goes back into the sow group with a boar, where they mate naturally and the whole cycle begins again. But, because it is slowed down, our pigs produce two litters a year rather than the 2.5 litters that would be common for intensively farmed pigs."

The Caspars send about five pigs a week to the abattoir and, even then, they have been gently prepared for their final journey. "We want their lives to be as stress-free as possible,"

Georgie says. "They are weighed weekly, so they become accustomed to the hustle and bustle of the runs and the yards. We also personally transport them to the butcher so we keep as much control over the process as possible."

Ormiston pigs are also fed a varied and seasonal diet, enjoying surplus produce from local farmers when available and oats that are planted for them to graze on (and stop the paddocks from compacting). Continuing the symbiotic relationship with other producers in the region, they are also fed whey from local cheesemakers, High Valley, just as Italy's parma pigs enjoy, and James is investigating the possibility of introducing the grain left over from the local brewery to the pigs' diet.

The Caspars have recently joined forces with Burrundulla vineyard to open a farm shop cafe adjacent to the cellar door. Local tasting plates, including smallgoods made from Ormiston pork, will feature on the menu along with other local and seasonal produce.

They are unapologetic that their pork is not as lean as much other pork. "Everything we do is aimed at improving the quality of our meat and its flavour," James says. "Traditional breeds tend to carry more fat and the marbling through the meat makes it more tender. Because our pigs free range, their muscles are used more and that makes for better texture. We explain to our customers that fat carries flavour. So the solution is to cook our pork with the fat on and cut it off on the plate if you don't want to eat it."

Ormiston Free Range pork is available in Mudgee at Hodges Butchery, in Sydney at the Pyrmont Growers Market (first Saturday of the month) and The Village Provadore in Annandale. Or contact the Caspars to arrange home delivery.

[www.ormistonfreerange.com.au](http://www.ormistonfreerange.com.au)  
[www.humanechoice.com.au](http://www.humanechoice.com.au)

with Humane Choice, an American organisation that does independent auditing to ensure the meat is safe, can be traced from paddock to plate and is high quality."

Georgie adds that sow stalls [cages barely bigger than the pig] have been illegal in the UK for more than a decade, while much of Australia's pork is, to a greater or lesser extent, intensively farmed. With around 20 breeding sows and two boars, Ormiston production is small. Their herd is mainly Berkshire (black with white faces) and large white cross-breeds (Landrace and Saddlebacks).

"Anyone who has spent time with pigs will know of their great intelligence," James says. "They deserve to be treated with the greatest compassion and respect. It starts with the sow moving to her maternity paddock in the last phases of pregnancy. There, she has her own straw hut in which to build a nest and space to roam in or rest in the shade of the trees. Once the piglets are born, we allow them to choose to mix with the other mums



**Above:** Felix and Emily, budding young pig farmers on the farm on the outskirts of Mudgee.

**Left:** "A happy pig is a pig that's free to express its natural behaviours."

