

# Three acres and a cow

David and Sara Gormley-O'Brien reined in their professional lives to focus on food production and living with intent.

Words and photos by Kathy Mexted

David and Sara were strangers on the train who regularly commuted a five-hour round trip from Bendigo in central Victoria to Melbourne. After three years, David took up the only seat, which happened to be opposite Sara.

David, an academic in ancient languages, spied Sara reading Origen, a 3rd century Christian philosopher.

"Why aren't you reading that in Greek?" he asked.

And so began the relationship that took them to marriage and a lifestyle far removed from the train.

"We had similar education and intellectual interests, which was in the classics, philosophy and humanities," says Sara. "Since then, we have evolved as a couple, to stepping lightly and living deliberately."

The conscious decision to "live deliberately" began slowly by rolling back their involvement in the market economy, and over five years reducing their commitments and workload far enough to earn just enough money to meet their obligations, enjoy their new home and business, *Three Acres and a Cow*.

"We got geese, a house cow, a sheep and then the garden beds. We kept layering on all the things we

required for a greater self-sufficiency, and that in itself became a higher priority than having money to spend on things we 'could' be doing. I took a package as soon as possible from work, and focused on the things that had now become important. Working in the soil makes me feel more in tune with what's essential; more grounded and available to other people. There are many people that need help and I understand that more now," says Sara.

With much of the acre around the house planted with vegetables, fruit and flowering plants for the bees, David and Sara eat almost solely out of their own garden. Eating in response to seasonal produce and availability, they invest their time and energy in their food, which returns an investment in self.

Behind the house, a Dexter cow (Megan) and a Cheviot sheep (Leslie) share an enclosure with a roll of hay and a timber shelter. The south side is an open clay paddock where chickens, ducks, geese and a huge turkey named Uncle Tom share a chookhouse and a seasonal dam. The bee boxes are under a row of native trees at the far side of the paddock. The couple buy almost

no produce, and if the onions or potatoes run out, they simply choose a different dish.

"We have an incredibly rich and varied diet," says Sara. "The least productive time, unfortunately, is aligned with our festive season. We have a lot more greens in winter, although carrots and beetroots grow well also."

"Some people promote sustainable living," says David. "John Seymour and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall have been inspirations for us. They are both great at normalising food. I also admire Australians Graeme Hand and Colin Seis for their work with pasture management with the view to improving the soil."

"I think food for modern society is no longer about sharing – it's just eating what has become a commodity – letting others provide one of your basic needs, which we see as a way of becoming enslaved or dependent on outside forces. It alienates them from the essence of life and the ability to truly share it because they're not invested in it."

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Sara and David Gormley-O'Brien, almost "disgustingly content" with their decision to slow down and "live deliberately".





*“Food plus family becomes community. It’s a giving of self, and the nature of the transaction is that receivers often get a totally different meaning out of the meal.”*

Perhaps the biggest aspect of living so intentionally is knowing the true value of the produce or the chicken that’s just been eaten for lunch. That chicken continues to be used for another month in soups and stocks and spread as long as possible, rather than being devoured and discarded.

Although the food is shared with their families, the couple say their extended family lives urbanely and the meaning of family now extends beyond genetics to embrace the community around them.

“We develop really close relationships with other like-minded people based on reciprocity,” says David. “We might provide quail eggs and get paid with horse poo. It’s a positive and intense transaction creating goodwill and a strong bond. Food plus family becomes community. It’s a giving of self, and the nature of the transaction is that receivers often get a totally different meaning out of the meal.”

Their real love is sharing their skills and knowledge. David was involved in establishing the local ‘Bee-Friendly Society’ and helps new beekeepers learn the craft, working closely with them when they harvest their first honey. One of his most surprising and intense experiences came during one of these bee-keeping encounters.

“We were in my friend’s laundry and she was delighting in the first honey she’d produced and which was now running down her hands and arms. She was beaming. It was an intense thing to witness the unrestrained response as she licked it up. You do see a bit of teariness and great joy at times. When you have to work for it, you treat things with a great deal more respect and love.”

David and Sara are under no illusion that small-scale growing like theirs will, by itself, cure the world’s problems, but they do believe in diversity rather than monoculture. They also believe that there may be a place for genetic modification.

“We have no problem with the genetic modification of vegetables in itself, but don’t agree with the focus on making plants more resistant to herbicides or containing pesticides,” says David. “It’s great to be able to grow rice in a drier climate, for example; particularly as climates change, genetic modification may provide a partial answer to climate change requirements. We are against some of the ways chemical companies are using GMOs, which impact biodiversity, increase the need for fertilisers and water, and often create a financial burden on those least able to afford it.

“Our small town has big blocks. The ration of land to person allows for small-scale growing and broad-spectrum farming. If everybody in this town grew something to eat instead of solely decorative gardens, we’d probably have enough to feed the town. It wouldn’t work in the city where the urban footprint is too great, but it could work out here.

“I often feel impotent against climate change and population growth because it’s completely out of my control. Living like this helps me not fall into despair.”

As she turns a trickling hose onto the cauliflower in the front yard, Sara collects a large bunch of endive and herbs, and eyes the maturing espaliered apples.

“I work several times a week at the Mt Macedon nursery and elsewhere offering gardening services and advice, helping people plan and create vegetable gardens,” says Sara. “Our friends now comment that we seem to be ‘disgustingly content’. There’s something completely calming about living this way. We are indeed content.” •

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