

WWOOFing: THE SAUSAGE ROLL MADE ME DO IT.

By Sue Jackson

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As a born-again vegetarian, I don't even eat sausage rolls these days, but five years ago things were very different. Back then, I was on a quest to experience the ultimate sausage roll. And I finally discovered it – on the buffet table, in the dining room at McLeod Ecofarm on French Island, 65km south-east of Melbourne, where I'd gone for the day to learn about organics.

Smacking my lips, I enquired about the roll's history from a friendly heavily-accented young woman, called Madeleine, who was overseeing the feast. Like me, you are probably a *Babe* fan, so I will spare you the details. But I was amazed to learn that the delicious buffet lunch, with its breads, pizzas, sausages, twenty or so salads and of course sausage rolls, was entirely home-grown, and innocent of sprays or pesticides.

Returning for seconds (or was that fourths?), I asked Madeleine where she hailed from. She said she was born in Marseilles, but had been 'WWOOFing' for so long she felt like a citizen of the world.

When I asked what she meant, she smiled, 'Willing Workers on Organic Farms.' She had made jam and cheese and tended donkeys on a donkey farm in Tourettes, dug potatoes and strung garlic with the musician owner of a self-sustaining farm in Valls, Spain and learned to build dry stone walls on the island of Paros, Greece. In Mexico, she arrived at a mud brick house in the middle of the jungle to find a note from the absent owner suggesting she use the house for as

long as she liked, and find some work to do. I realised there was a whole world out there I knew nothing about, and after establishing that age was no bar, I decided I wanted in.

My friend Phyll, who is always up for adventure, agreed to join me on my inaugural stint as a WWOOFer. Selecting the farm wasn't easy, as there were 1200 to choose from in the Australian WWOOF Book. I rather fancied sleeping in a yurt or a teepee. But we finally settled on Brockspur Farm, idyllically situated in the beautiful Yarra Valley, and surrounded by Kinglake National Park and Toolangi State Forest.

Brockspur Farm boasted goats, cows, sheep, horses and chooks as well as vegetables, herbs and fruit. And I must admit the specification by the owners, Amanda and Ed, that they welcomed an 'exchange of ideas' (which I read as sitting down, feet up, and yarning) was the final selling point. Not that selling was an issue, as one of the principles of WWOOFing is that labour is simply exchanged for food and board. That's why a steady flow of WWOOFers can make all the difference on generally smaller organic farms, where the ethos around self sufficiency often means no money to pay for labour.

Phyll and I worked hard at Brockspur Farm. We weeded between the vines, and peeled and sliced a mountain of apples - until I had to stop because of a blister on my finger. We fed and watered the animals, and spent a whole afternoon using a particularly temperamental wheelbarrow to transport monstrous piles of debris and dried brush to a far-distant paddock.

On our last night, replete with Amanda's great vegetable soup and corn, picked by my own hand, which I swear sang to me as I dropped it into the pot, we

made our way outside. Then Phyll and I lit the bonfires. We sat on the grass with the family, watching the flames and talked for ages about the stars and organic cooking. Even though, at one stage, I accidentally lay back on a cow pat, it was a wonderful night.

You might have guessed that I'm no country girl. More than 10kms from the CBD and I start feeling light-headed. But one thing I treasured about my time at Brockspur Farm was the opportunity to see where the food on my table really comes from – it doesn't start life behind plastic on Styrofoam trays, after all.

Anyway, I knew I was hooked and that a single WWOOFing experience wouldn't sustain me for long. As luck would have it, at that very time, my sister Jude made her sea change, buying an ex-ostrich farm north of Bendigo. She was delighted to have her very own WWOOFer.

As with many organic farmers, Jude is determined to lighten her footprint on the planet - reducing and recycling are her modus operandi. I've helped her assemble, meccano-like, four rusted old gates and top them with tired brush fencing to construct a quite passable, even comfy, hen house. Her worm farm produces fertiliser - 'worm wine' - of gold medal standard. The '05 is a little frisky and a touch on the nose, but of peerless colour - her best yet. Recently, I've even joined her 'dumpster diving'. Jude exchanges eggs for vegetable peelings from a food preparation outlet nearby. The only catch is she has to sort through the scraps in the dumpsters herself. But the gleam in the chickens' eyes as we present them with their goodies makes it all worthwhile.

With the effects of global warming biting harder and the water crisis intensifying, it can be a real eye-opener for a city dweller to spend time on a farm.

For those willing to give it a go, the WWOOFers Bulletin Board is currently crammed with requests for help from all over Australia. Personally, I think this is the perfect time to try WWOOFing, especially as I now appreciate how much more there is to a sausage roll than first meets the eye.

More

Purchase of **WWOOF Australia's** *Australian WWOOF Book* entitles you to 12 months membership of WWOOF Australia (\$55 singles, \$65 for two), and access to any of the hosts. The price includes a modest insurance plan.

WWOOF Australia's *List of Independent Hosts* (\$27) has over 700 listings from 41 countries without their own WWOOF organisation.

Ph (03) 5155 0218

Web wwoof.com.au

Email wwoof@wwoof.com.au

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