

# BLUE Mountains *life*

INCLUDING THE CENTRAL WEST & THE HAWKESBURY-NEPEAN

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# HILLBILLY CIDER — the Toast of Bilpin

It's a simple formula but one that has taken cider lovers by storm.

by Joni Leimgruber



Shane and Tessa at Yarabee with the Hillbilly Cider truck, hand painted by local artist Sam Mosely

**H**illbilly Cider is fast becoming an iconic brand in the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains regions but owners Shane and Tessa McLaughlin say it almost happened by accident. When they moved to Bilpin in 2007, it was the country lifestyle that attracted them. But having already established and managed the family vineyard in Nyngan, Shane began playing around with making batches of apple cider. "When we moved out here we weren't thinking cider,"

Shane explains but the apples were surrounding them and it was as if it was meant to be. Soon he was digging out a cellar under the house (by hand!). "Shane had test ferments going all over the house" Tessa explains and before they knew it, Shane and Tessa were developing the cider and building relationships with local apple growers. Now their logo can be seen in most cafés, bars and restaurants throughout the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains regions and in many Sydney venues.

Even the critics seem to like it, awarding Hillbilly Pear Cider the 2014 Australian Cider 'Best in class', silver for the Hillbilly Apple Cider and many other awards over the years.

Shane has spent time in the UK and France, travelling around to see what other cider makers were doing and to learn the history and tradition behind the popular drink. "I wanted to get a bit of historical knowledge," he says. "When you visit other producers I believe that it's very important to take little bits and pieces and then give it your own flare and personality, not just emulate what they're doing." Australian ciders are very different to the European variety, Shane discovered and having worked to perfect his own hand crafted cider, the Hillbilly fermentation process takes around 6 weeks. "Every batch is different," he explains. "Especially with the pears. I had a pear cider that took 91 days to ferment. It just shows that when you are working with fresh fruit you need to work differently with each batch and nurture it through as opposed to commercial makers who have a set process which is usually 6 days."

Farming has been in Shane's family since his great grandfather began



Shane tests the pear cider

growing wheat in the 1880s on the family's 30,000 acre sheep station in Nyngan. Growing up on the property, Shane worked on the farm until age 26 when he came home with a grand, new idea for the farm. "Agriculture was struggling because of the drought, so we needed to diversify," he explains. Shane and his family began planting a vineyard and in 1997, Canonbah Bridge Wines was launched. The family label is now sold all over the world and though his dad primarily cares for the vineyard these days, the McLaughlins are regularly at the farm, especially during pruning and harvest times.

These days the McLaughlins have two daughters; 5 year old Leander and Cleo who is 4. The family spends most weekends travelling to markets where the girls often set up their own stall, selling their lovingly made paintings. Leander is proud that she now has her own cash register and the budding artist recently sold a piece to winner of the 2013 Packing

Room Prize, Mathew Lynn! It seems she has inherited some of the charisma which has fuelled the success of her parents' business. It is this charisma which draws them to markets all over the region, where they are able to get to know their customers. And locals are clearly proud of the range. Shane and Tessa remember a lady visiting their stall at the Glenbrook Markets to buy some cider for her family's Christmas celebrations. "I'm taking this to Mosman to show all my relatives how good we are in the mountains!" she told them. Another customer contacted Shane and Tessa and explained that her father, an avid Hillbilly Cider fan, was turning 80 and she wanted to be able to give him a box full of Hillbilly Cider and products.

Hillbilly Cider is proud of its mountain locality and features fruit from the Bilpin area. "We're really excited to be using the 'Julie' apple, which was discovered by Bill Shields," Tessa explains. Found by accident, the Julie (named after Bill's wife) was a cross pollination found growing outside his shed. "It was a chance seedling," Shane explains, which probably began as a core thrown out a passer-by's car window. "There was a 1 in 100,000 chance that it was edible." Bill cultivated the plant and its fruit turned out to be a beautiful red apple variety whose closest relative is the Fuji. "It's the sweetest apple around by a long way," Shane says. "It's a mid-season, so it's high in sugar because it was created in Bilpin, so is suited to the climate." The couple's latest release is a limited edition Vintage 2014 cider made purely from two Bilpin orchards; Tadrosse Orchard and Shields Orchard. "It's made from a small batch of apples right at the end of the 2014 season and double fermented in French oak," Tessa says.

As well as being a celebration of people and the area, Hillbilly Cider is proud of being completely natural, a value which Shane sees as being important these days. "People care about the provenance of what they eat and the values of the companies they buy from," he says. "Our cider is the opposite of a big company mass produced product and that's what appeals to our Hillbilly fans!"

This celebration of natural and original continues in their home, built by local resident Peter Shaw, which was constructed back in the days when aged, discarded materials could be swapped for a carton of beer or \$30 here and there. 'Yarabee' features sandstone blocks from an old wing of the RPA, beams from the convict built Goldsbrough Mort Woolstore, a huge fireplace which used to serve as a blacksmith's kiln and parquet flooring from the old Manly Ballroom. The roof of the home holds 30 tonnes of gravel, providing year round insulation and acting as an oversized garden bed. The established gardens were created to be self-sustaining and the overall effect is somewhat tranquil; almost like a rainforest, tucked in among the mountains and perched alongside a dam complete with wooden jetty and bridge.

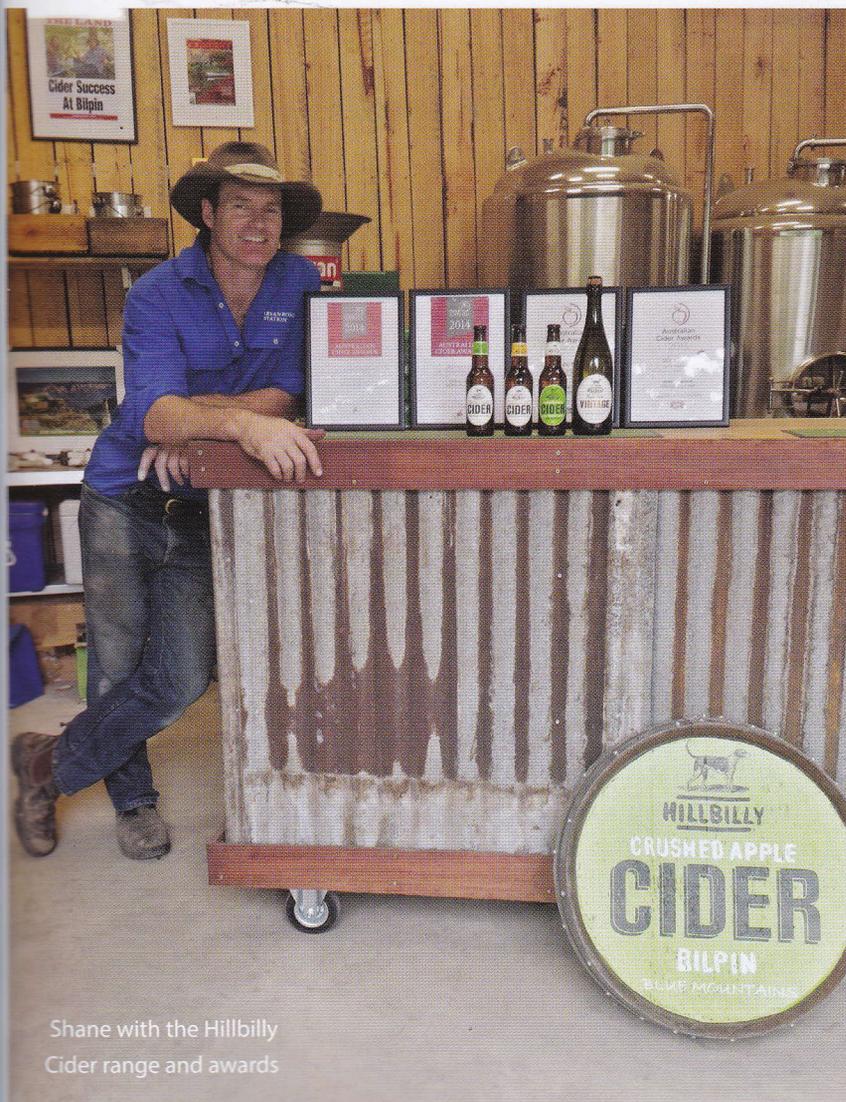
All this came close to being lost in the October 2013 bushfires which crowned just 50 metres away from Yarabee. On that terrible day, Shane had gone home for a rest after working double RFS shifts. At around 2pm he awoke with an uneasy feeling, to see the fire crowning just across from the family home. With no electricity or mobile reception, Shane planned to stay and fight, taking refuge under a dinghy in the dam if need be. Fortunately a TV crew drove down the driveway at just the right time and was able to send for help. After the fires had passed, the Bilpin RFS enjoyed some non-alcoholic Hillbilly cider while swapping stories of the day.

Creating something unique to a region, which locals can be proud of, and which helps bring people of all ages together is special. And to be able to do it in a way which embraces the farmers who worked to provide the produce is typical of mountain living. Less about cider and more about the community, Tessa and Shane can be proud of what they have achieved. ❖

The McLaughlins on the jetty with Frank, the family pet and the dinghy which was his backup plan during the fires



CREATING SOMETHING  
UNIQUE TO A REGION  
WHICH LOCALS CAN BE  
PROUD OF.



Shane with the Hillbilly Cider range and award



Tessa making Slow Cooked Apricot Chicken with Hillbilly Pear Cider and Garden Herbs