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# COUNTRY

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*On location with*

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SA POTTER COLLEEN MCLEOD  
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WA FARMER DAVID POLLOCK

*A tale  
of two sisters*  
AND THEIR  
AMAZING HOMES

*She'll be apples*  
AT HOME WITH  
THE HILLBILLIES  
CYCLING THE  
UK CIDER TRAIL

*Salute to autumn*

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# At home with the hillbillies

AN ENTERPRISING NSW COUPLE HAS DEVOTED THEIR PRODIGIOUS TALENTS AND ENERGY TO CREATING A BENCHMARK CIDER FROM BILPIN'S FAMOUS APPLES.

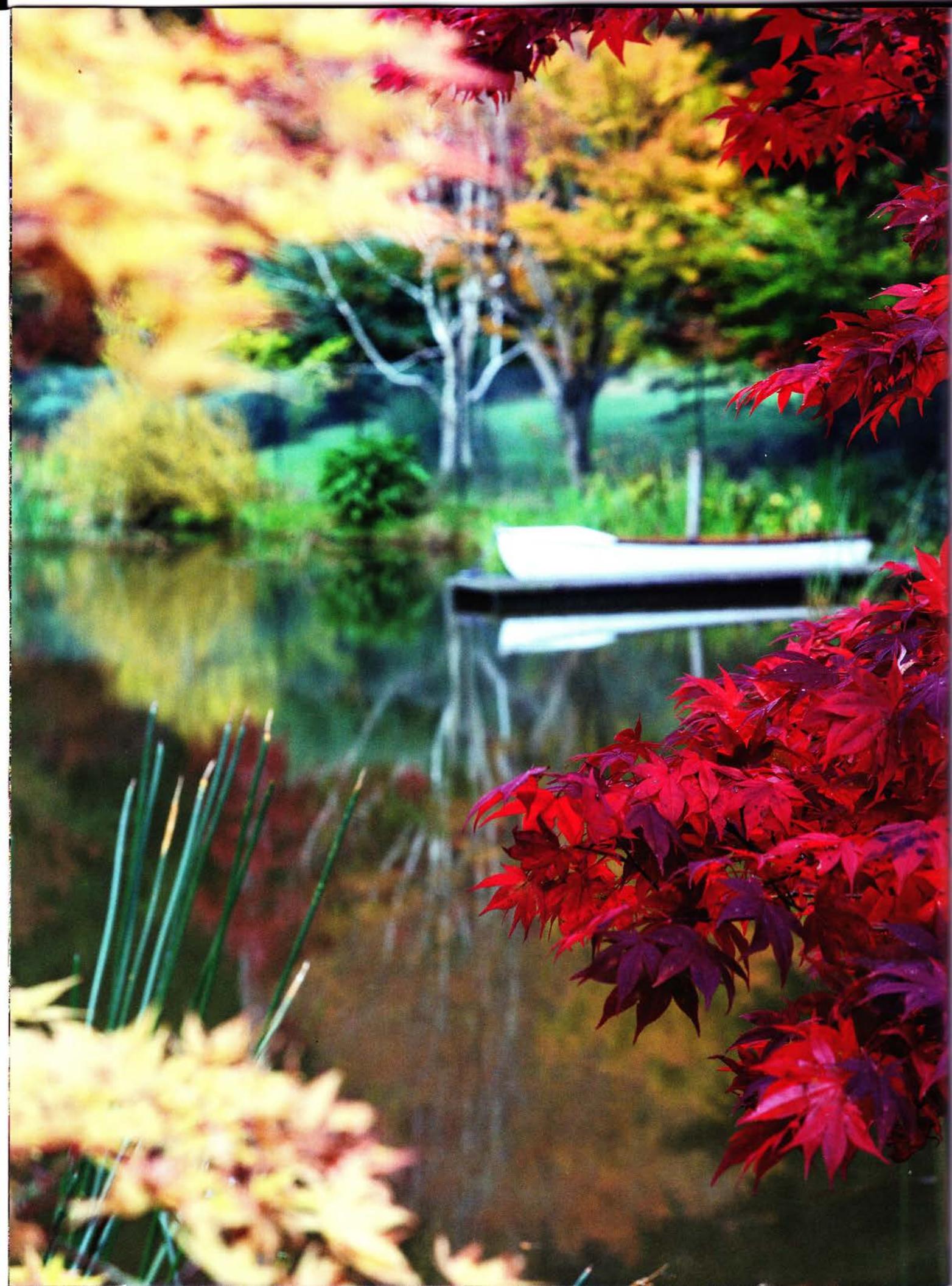
*By Peter Hinton, photography Ken Brass*

Travelling west across the river at Richmond, we have to turn the headlights on as we head into a typical Hawkesbury Valley misty autumn morning. As the incline increases, the motor has to work that little bit harder. Up through Kurmond, Kurrajong Hills and Heights, and through The Bends, where we roll the windows down to hear the beautiful melody of bell birds. The fog is behind us now and the sun shines brightly in the clear crisp mountain air. We pass fruit stalls with promises of all manner of stone fruits but our destination lies higher up, just beyond the small mountain township of Bilpin, the home of the mountain apple.

In 1823, a young Archibald Bell came this way with his indigenous guides, seeking an alternative route to the western plains and later the goldfields of Bathurst. It was he who first noted the rich pockets of alluvial soil and settlers soon followed, eager to grow fruit trees in the area.

Where there are apples so there is cider, or so you would have thought, but it took an ex-Australian Commonwealth Games rower, his English wife and almost 200 years before it became a reality in Bilpin. Growing up in Nyngan in northwestern New South Wales, Shane McLaughlin was a million miles away from being a cider producer. ➤





Attending King's School in Parramatta, he became involved in rowing, a sport that would change his life forever. As his prowess increased, Shane was picked to row for Australia in the eights, fours and pairs. However, rowing had a far greater prize in store than his gold and bronze medals at the Commonwealth Games at Victoria, Canada.

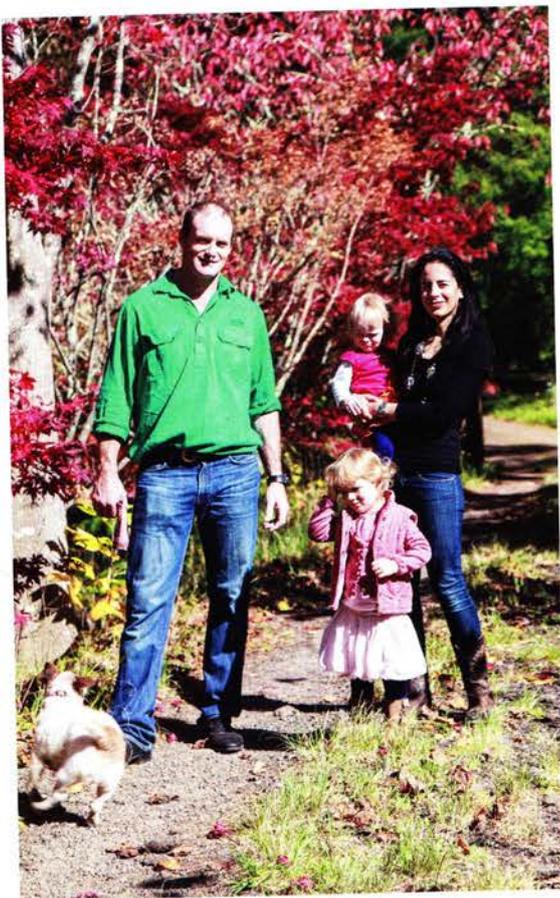
It was in 1999 at London's Henley Royal Regatta that Shane was introduced to an English rower's girlfriend. Shane's face breaks into a grin "Yes, we met at Henley," he says. "She was with her boyfriend, but I nicked her." In spite of there being an instant "connection" the pair had to wait until the Sydney Olympics a year later to seal the deal. Tessa was in Sydney with her boyfriend who was keen to visit "the real outback". This turned out to be Tessa's first glimpse of the place she was to call home and a world away from her home in London.

The couple started their married life at Shane's family property at Nyngan. He planted a vineyard at Canonbah Bridge, an arid region of very poor soil comparable to those found in parts of Spain. Happily, vines are able to be grown just about anywhere and the vineyard was a success. ➤

At King's School he became involved in rowing, a sport that would change his life.



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Shane and Tessa with Leander, four years and Chloe, two years; apples ready for crushing; Shane in the orchard; autumn engulfs their Bilpin home.

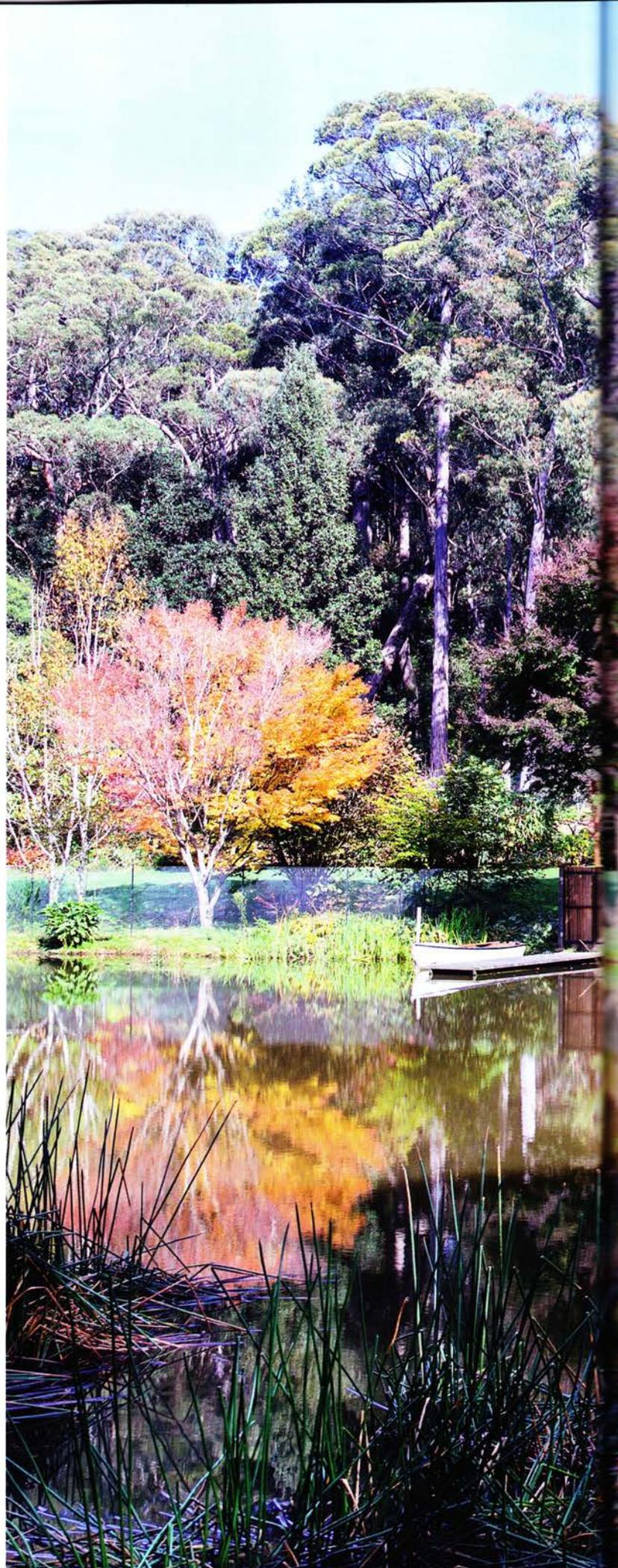


Tessa pitched right in using organisational abilities amassed from her previous employment in corporate HR and the pair enjoyed trips around the world promoting the Canonbah Bridge Shiraz and winning a number of awards in the process. Indeed, 80 per cent of their production is still sold in overseas markets.

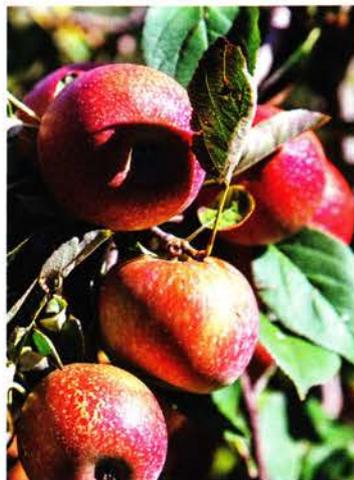
Wanting to spend more time at home in Australia and to start a family, Shane turned his mind to an alternative source of income, one that would utilise his skills as a vintner but which had a quicker financial turnaround than the seven years from planting to bottle that wine making requires. The cider movement in Australia was gathering pace and Shane thought it would be a good idea to try his hand. "The way we make our cider is a very similar process, being halfway between a beer and a wine," he explains.

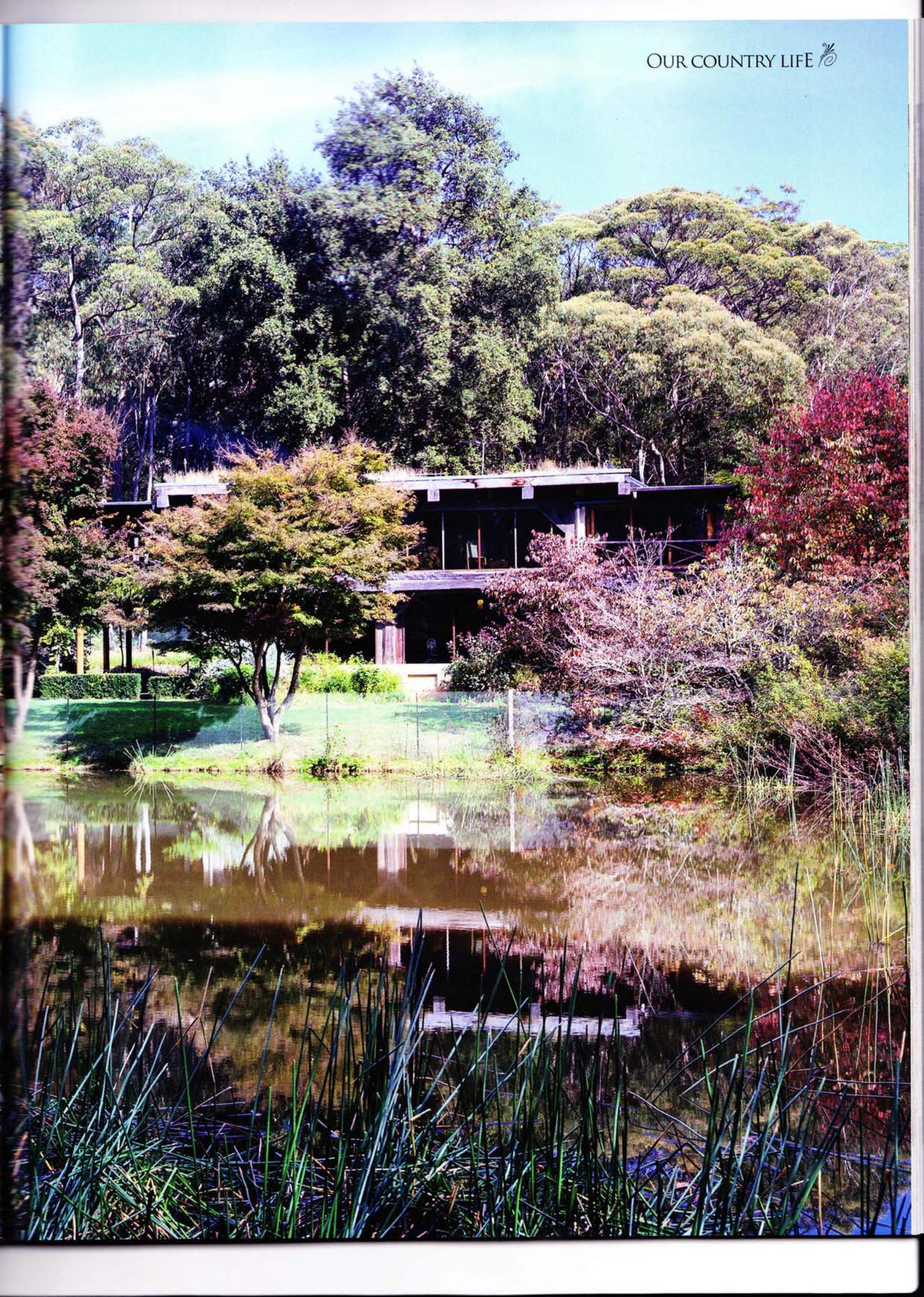
It became apparent that the couple would have to move closer to the major conurbations of the east coast and Bilpin was seen as an ideal compromise. It was close to Sydney but with good access to the western plains, with the benefit that it was synonymous with apples and could provide a regular source of the fruit for crushing.

The hunt for a suitable property was not a straightforward one. Shane had his eye on the current house, but it took a couple of years of persuasion and negotiation before they



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Shane in the Hillbilly cellar under the house; the house overlooks a dam that doubles duty as a bushfire fighting resource; only mountain-grown apples are used in Hillbilly Cider, including Bilpin apple guru Bill Shields' fruit.







**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Leander on her rocking horse; Chloe engrossed in a book; full-length glazing in the living area embraces the season outdoors; just about every building material is recycled.



The gigantic ironbark beams that span the ground floor level came from the Goldsbrough Mort Woolstore in Pymont.

shook hands with the home's owner/builder, high-altitude landscaper Peter Shaw, and they were able to call it home.

They were immediately struck by its position, its quietness and above all its quirky individuality. "It was a lifestyle choice and we fell in love with the place," Tessa says. The couple had always felt a connection with mountain homes, taking inspiration from time spent in Canada, specifically the Rockies and the country style they found there. Rather than isolating themselves, they found a raft of friends and relations who wanted to visit each and every weekend.

Tucked away in a secret valley, nestled into a quiet fold in the hills, the house is definitely a one-off. The builder was



a bowerbird accumulating bits and pieces over the years from 1978 to the late '90s from sources scattered all over Sydney. Some of it was acquired by swapping for a case of beer, eventually bringing them together in the serene setting. Approaching the property across the dam the visitor is immediately struck by how the building fits into its environment as though it has grown, organically into its current position. In a way it has.

Entering the house there's a solid, enduring feel in the main room. The gigantic ironbark beams that span the ground floor level came from the Goldsbrough Mort Woolstore in Pyrmont. They span some six metres and add

a sense of permanence and gravitas to the building. The use of timber, almost all of it reclaimed in some way, creates a cosiness that is enhanced by the old blacksmith's kiln that acts as the main fireplace. Double-glazed windows frame a spectacular outlook across the lawn to the dam.

From the downstairs floorboards (reclaimed from the old Manly Pacific ballroom, which took six weeks to re-lay) to the argon-filled windows (surplus to requirements when the MLC building in Sydney was built), the whole house has a story. Upstairs, the floorboards are strangely familiar but few would guess they are from old bowling alley lanes. The feature is repeated on the kitchen benchtops downstairs. ►



## MEET THE HILLBILLIES

Catch up with Shane and Tessa on the second and fourth Saturday of the month at Castle Hill market ([blackcastleevents.com.au](http://blackcastleevents.com.au)), the second Sunday at Blackheath market ([blackcastleevents.com.au](http://blackcastleevents.com.au)), first, third and fifth Saturday at Leichhardt ([organicfoodmarkets.com.au](http://organicfoodmarkets.com.au)) and Marrickville on the first, third, fourth and fifth Sunday ([organicfoodmarkets.com.au](http://organicfoodmarkets.com.au)). For more information visit [hillbillycider.com.au](http://hillbillycider.com.au).

**CLOCKWISE**  
**FROM RIGHT:** The McLaughlins' cider is a truly local drop; fine food and drinks underpin Shane and Tessa's philosophy; Family time on an autumn day at their mountain retreat.



So it was here, among the trees beside the national park that Hillbilly Cider was conceived, where Shane, using his winemaking skills, produces a cider made entirely from Australian apples. It is a 100 per cent crushed apple cider made from Bilpin apples with no added sugar, artificial flavours or chemicals.

"There is a lot of snobbishness in cider making," Shane says. "The traditionalist will tell you, you cannot make cider from eating varieties, they must be cookers. The beauty about our cider is we're using traditional cider-making techniques with classic Aussie varieties. We use great apples, including Bilpin apple guru Bill Shields' apples."

Far from the globe-trotting, high-powered sell of Canonbah Bridge wine, Shane and Tessa, in line with their more relaxed lifestyle, have chosen to sell their cider at growers markets and have noticed an increasing demand for buying locally made produce direct from farmers.

"We love chatting to people at the markets, sharing cider recipes and hearing about people's vegie gardens," Tessa adds. "It's also about building that sense of local community — chatting to your neighbours as you buy your fruit and bread — or as you sip a cider."

In the pipeline Shane and Tessa have plans to produce a pear cider and a non-alcoholic version to cater for all tastes and ages. Every weekend the McLaughlins load up their ute and head to markets in the Blue Mountains, the Hawkesbury or Sydney. It's a great opportunity for the couple to meet their aficionados and convert new ones with tastings. *MC*

