

Regenerative farmer Lauren Mathers with her Berkshire sows. "There's something about seeing a pig in a paddock that's always just really grounded me," she says.

TRUE CALLING

A SERIES OF FALSE STARTS LED REGENERATIVE PIG FARMER LAUREN MATHERS TO HER VOCATION AT BUNDARRA FARM IN THE WESTERN RIVERINA DISTRICT OF NSW.

WORDS RACHEL WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY OLIVER FORD
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LAUREN MATHERS' EARLY MISSTEPS, including three unfinished degrees and a short-lived career as a veterinary nurse, steered her towards the vocation she was meant for all along. "I failed everything," she says lightheartedly. "Well actually, I didn't finish anything. Looking back, I realise I wasn't ready for uni, but I had to go because that's what was expected of me."

A country girl through and through, Lauren, 44, grew up on what she describes as a "typical" mixed cropping and livestock farm just 50 kilometres north of her current home in Barham, New South Wales. "Initially, I wanted to be a vet, but I didn't get the marks, so I tried to get in through the back door with a science degree," Lauren recalls.

But when she found she didn't enjoy the science, she swapped to journalism. "I'd almost finished before I moved home to work as a vet nurse, but I soon realised I'd never get out of the office. Eventually, I ended up doing agricultural science at the University of New England, but I'm one subject short of graduating, and while it was great, I felt it lacked what I needed."

It wasn't until Lauren got a job at the local water authority that she began to see the way forward. "I created an action plan for a creek system that had experienced some adverse effects from agriculture and mismanagement, and I just loved it. That was my segue into environmental work," she says. "Through that I discovered a lot of paddock-to-plate opportunities that people weren't snagging up." Her entrepreneurial solution

was to open a cafe and food shop showcasing local produce. "There was nothing like that here back in 2007," she adds.

This experience was the catalyst for Lauren's next, and final, career move. "When I had the cafe we couldn't source quality pork," she says. "That was really why I started Bundarra Farm – because the pork we were getting was really inconsistent. When I looked into the animal welfare side of things, I thought, 'I can do better than that', and here we are."

Dedicated to ethical, local and regenerative agriculture, Bundarra Farm is an 85-hectare property that's home to 80 free-range heritage Berkshire sows, 1000 free-range Sommerlad chickens and 30 retired dairy cows. "We're not big, but our animal numbers aren't big either," says Lauren.

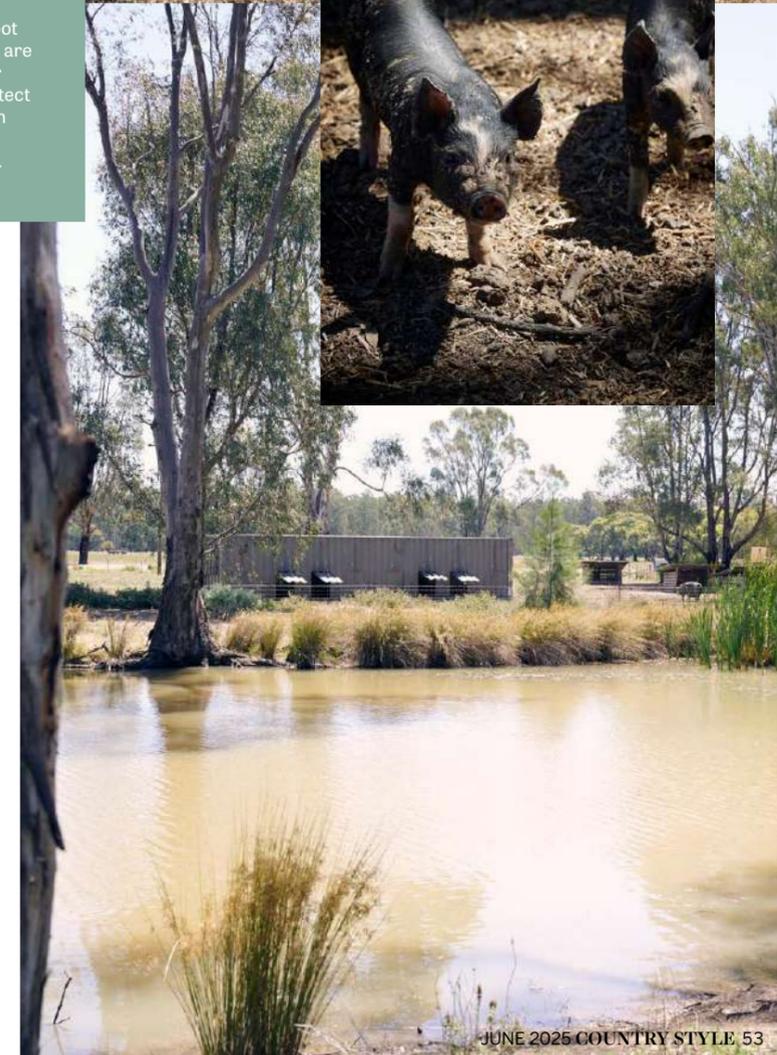
A passionate farmer, it's clear Lauren has a wealth of knowledge that she's gathered mainly on the job, rather than in a classroom. "Regenerative farming is all about the soil," she says. "For us, getting the most out of our soil without damaging the environment is the aim. So, we've never added chemicals, we've never ploughed – because ploughing destroys your soil structure and releases carbon into the atmosphere – and we rest our pastures and feed the soil with cover crops."

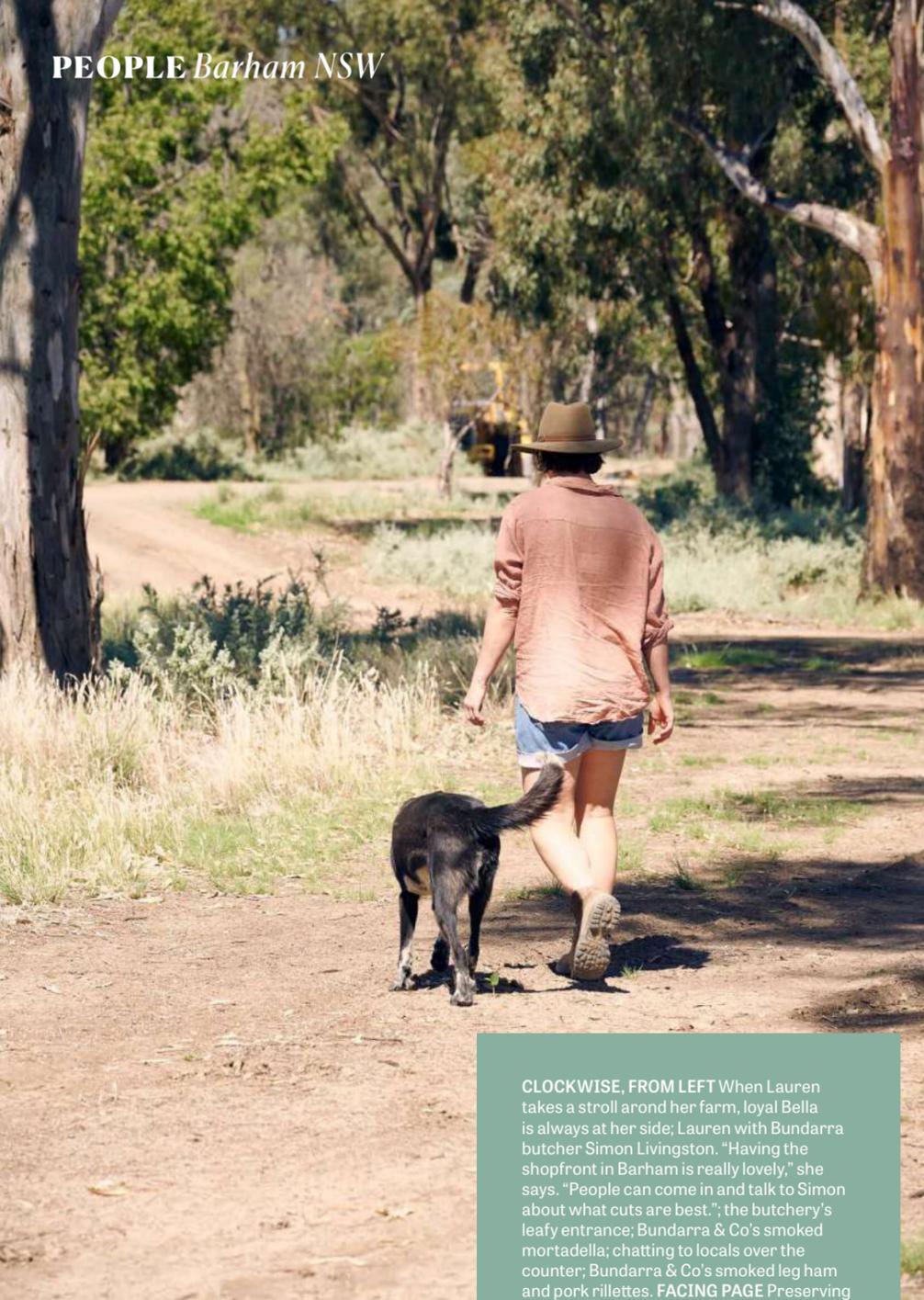
But she admits things have to change in the wider farming community to create a viable future for the next generation, including her children Lucy, 14, Frida, 12, and nine-year-old George. "We can't keep farming the way we've been farming forever and expect different results," explains Lauren. "We talk about feeding our bodies the right nutrients for proper gut health and it's exactly the same with soil. As food security becomes more of a hot topic, then hopefully the conversation will come around to the benefits of regenerative farming – not just for people, but also for the planet." >



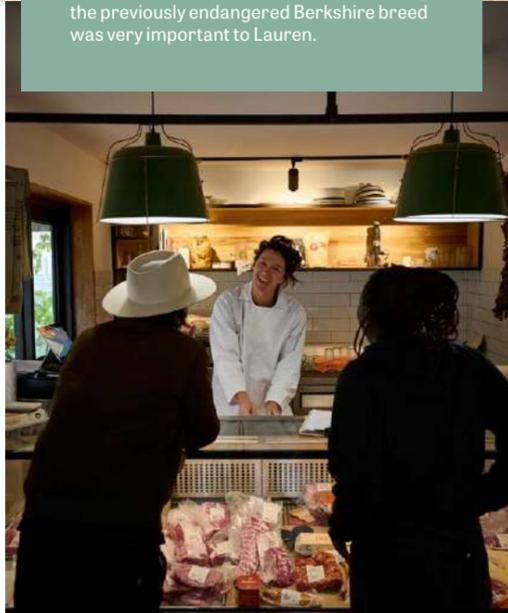
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CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE The Berkshire sows enjoy a shady spot under a tree. Lauren says she loves seeing the pigs root around and play in the mud; "The piglets are so adorable," says Lauren; "We keep our animals away from the farm dam to protect its little ecosystem," Lauren says; Lauren is at her happiest working outdoors. FACING PAGE Feeding time for the pigs.





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT When Lauren takes a stroll around her farm, loyal Bella is always at her side; Lauren with Bundarra butcher Simon Livingston. "Having the shopfront in Barham is really lovely," she says. "People can come in and talk to Simon about what cuts are best"; the butchery's leafy entrance; Bundarra & Co's smoked mortadella; chatting to locals over the counter; Bundarra & Co's smoked leg ham and pork rillettes. FACING PAGE Preserving the previously endangered Berkshire breed was very important to Lauren.



While Lauren continues to work at maximising biodiversity on the farm, she's also expanding the paddock-to-plate offering at her butchery, Bundarra & Co, in town. With a steady supply of customer favourites like leg ham, spare ribs and porchetta, this year the butchery will add salami to its retail offering. "Salami is the hardest product to get licensed in Australia," says Lauren. "It's a real achievement for us – it's something we've been striving to achieve for 10 years now."

That's not the only milestone of 2025 – Lauren has also worked hard to get the creek system running through her property recognised as an environmental asset. "It's taken heaps of work, but it's so exciting," she says. "It means we get 1000 megalitres of water from the Murray Darling Wetlands Working Group for wetland watering in the next month."

The effect of so much additional water will make parts of the property unrecognisable. "When the creek flooded a few years ago, it was incredible," recalls Lauren. "The biodiversity that came into this region was amazing – the birds, the native vegetation, it was just insane."

It's a just reward for years of hard work. "We're still on that journey – we're not perfect, but our goal is to create a beautiful place now that will be beautiful forever," says Lauren. *CF*
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