

# Strictly north west

Paul Mercurio's latest role as 'New England North West' ambassador takes him from art deco Greek cafés to wineries, waterfalls and wildlife

WORDS MARY KILEY

**WHEN SANDY MCNAUGHTON MOVED TO BINGARA** “for love”, she admits it was a bit of a shock to the system. With a population of 1300 people, the tiny town seems to be the antithesis of her cosmopolitan, coffee-swiggling home city of Melbourne. But Sandy, who relocated to the New England area in 2004 to be with her country-dwelling husband, has been conducting another love affair of sorts for most of her married life. Not surprisingly, given her background, it's with a café.

In 1999, Bingara council acquired the Roxy, a beautiful 1930s art deco theatre that had been sitting dormant for 40 years. After being painstakingly restored to its former glory, it was re-opened in May 2004 and now hosts everything from school graduation ceremonies to films to performances by professional artists and theatre companies. Acclaimed Aussie actor John Wood declared it a national treasure.

But, as lovely as the theatre is, there was one thing lacking – and

for the past seven years, Sandy has worked to set things right. The original owners of the Roxy were three partners from the Greek island of Kythera and the original complex included a Greek café. Sandy was determined to restore and re-open the café, along with an upstairs museum dedicated to commemorating and celebrating the contribution made by Greek immigrants to Australia.

“What I hope we're able to achieve is to tell the story of the Greeks who came to rural Australia and the contribution they made,” says Sandy. “[It's a story that] seems to resonate with so many people because they grew up in these small towns. And so many people who grew up in cities talk about going on trips and stopping and going to Greek cafés. They've touched many people's lives over generations.”

After its official re-opening in April, the café is now back in business. So whether you remember the glory days of the Greek café and want to reminisce or are just keen to have a uniquely

Australian experience, the Roxy complex is well worth a visit.

And, if you do make the trip to Bingara, it's also worth taking the time to explore the rest of the north-west New England area, which is at its best and most beautiful in the cooler months.

Stretching from the New England Highway to the edge of the outback, the region incorporates such areas as Tamworth, Inverell, Moree, Narrabri, Armidale, Glen Innes and the Great Dividing Range. It

covers thousands of kilometres in NSW and offers a wide range of activities. While most people are familiar with Tamworth's country music festival, they may not be aware of the area's many other attractions. Whether you're into food and wine, the arts, agriculture, wildlife or just kicking back in a tranquil, relaxing atmosphere among

**ABOVE:** Paul Mercurio reveals the breadth of his passion for New England produce.  
**BELOW:** Dangar Falls has water plunging 30m over a basalt wall.



Photos: New England North West Tourism/Bruce Williams Photography



**CAFÉ CULTURE:** Sandy McNaughton (right) worked to ensure the Roxy (above) paid tribute to its first Greek owners from the island of Kythera.




## GETTING THERE

Fly to Narrabri, Moree or Tamworth regional airports.

From Sydney, head to Newcastle and on to the New England Highway, Maitland, then along the Kamilaroi Highway and arrive at the southernmost part of New England, Quirindi, in around four hours. Tamworth is approximately five hours along the New England Highway and Moree will take you approximately 7.5 hours.

For more information about events and to download maps of the area, go to [www.newenglandnorthwest.com.au](http://www.newenglandnorthwest.com.au).

Known for its quality produce, the area recently gained a new fan, Paul Mercurio, who is now the New England North West Ambassador. A lover of good food, Paul says he “always walks away inspired” after talking to the locals. “They always have fantastic stories,” he enthuses. “I love hearing about where [the produce] has come from and who's making it and sharing in their passion and hardship.”

And there have been hardships indeed, with large portions of the area being affected by the December floods. But rather than pity or charity, the locals would rather people offered their support by visiting the area and enjoying themselves. So whether it's seeking sapphires in Inverell, taking a trip to a pecan farm or a dip in a hot Artesian pool in Moree, or going to an agricultural show in Gunnedah or Narrabri, you're bound to find something to entice and excite you in New England. And who knows? It may be the beginning of a beautiful love story... 

**WHIP CRACKING? CABER TOSSING? SCARECROW MAKING? IT'S ALL ON OFFER IN THE NEW ENGLAND AREA IN MAY AND JUNE**

## MAY

April 28-May 1

Kick up your heels – and your kilts – at the Australian Celtic Festival in Glen Innes. Centred round the Standing Stones, the festival includes parades, strongman events, music, dancing, Celtic foods and more. [www.australiancelticfestival.com](http://www.australiancelticfestival.com)



May 28-29

Whip cracking, egg catching, dog high-jumping – it's all happening at the Narrabri Show. Narrabri Showground. [www.narrabrishow.com.au](http://www.narrabrishow.com.au)

May 29

Watch celebrity chef cooking demos and sample a vast array of regional produce at the Moree On a Plate festival of food, art and wine. Moree Secondary College. [www.moreeonaplate.com.au](http://www.moreeonaplate.com.au)

## JUNE

June 11-13

Go boating at the Keepit Kool Regatta, Lake Keepit State Park, Gunnedah.

June 25

See a top Scot performer when Marion Martin portrays three formidable female singers in 'Hips, Harmony and Hitler' at the Roxy Theatre, Bingara.

June 25

Try local produce and help local causes at Uralla's Unique Markets. Only stallholders who make it, bake it or grow it themselves are allowed to have stalls and money raised goes to charities in the area. Pioneer Park, Uralla.