

The right brew

A once derelict general store has become a unique watering hole for the Victorian timber town of Forrest.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

A line of muddy mountain bikes rest against the verandah posts of the Forrest Brewery and the chatter of happy riders fills the autumn air. Behind the bar, Matt Bradshaw pours a pint of 'Pobblebonk', a provincial-style seasonal beer named after a frog and brewed using local strawberry clover honey. "It's named after a frog because it's our French beer," Matt laughs, flicking the tap off.

Located 85 kilometres south-west of Geelong and 40km north of Apollo Bay, Forrest Brewery is at the heart of a tourism revival for the former timber town of 170 people hidden in the Otway Ranges. "The town's last timber mill closed three days after I moved in," Matt explains, sipping a beer and recalling his journey from telecommunications technician to craft brewer.

Hailing from Melbourne's eastern suburbs, Matt completed an apprenticeship with Telstra after finishing school, took a redundancy package aged 23, and spent the next decade travelling the world, eventually returning to start his first business, a pedal-powered smoothie venture servicing the eastern state's summer music festivals. "That idea came about from a combination of doing lots of cycling and what I'd seen in South-East Asia, with people doing everything by hand, like grinding knives with bicycle power," Matt says. "All my friends told me I was insane, but it turned out well."

For a decade he worked festivals down south during the summer, the dry-season markets in Darwin and enjoyed a stint with Territory safari legend Joe Wilson as cook and general hand taking tourists into Arnhem Land. Then, in 2002, while renting in Torquay, Matt decided he needed a base and discovered Forrest's crumbling former general store on a fishing trip with his brother. "We drove past and I saw 'For Sale' spray-painted on the front window," Matt says. "The floors were missing and half the roof was gone, but I bought it, gathered all my stuff from friends and family's places, and moved into the little cottage next door."

As he set about renovating, Matt had the idea of a brewery. To learn more, he started helping other small brewers and completed a short course at Ballarat. In 2008, the Victorian government chose Forrest as the site for a 65km network of mountain-bike trails, and the following year the brewery idea gained real traction when Matt's sister Sharon quit her corporate publishing job to join the venture.

When a second-hand brewery was sourced from Melbourne, the venture was almost a reality. But not everyone thought it was a good idea. "My 75-year-old uncle who'd been in the beer business his whole life rang and told me, 'Don't do it, it's crazy, craft beer is never going to go anywhere,'" Matt recalls.

Fast-forward eight years and Forrest Brewery has ridden the dual wave of Australia's booming craft beer and mountain-biking industries. "The past five years it's really taken off," Matt says. He is head brewer and Sharon general manager. "I'm the ideas person and she's the brains," he jokes.

Sharon says she does not miss her former corporate life. "You do work a lot harder for yourself, but it's a whole lot more rewarding in the end," she says. "And it's great to see how people respond to the brewery."

Open seven days for breakfast and lunch, and for dinner Thursday to Saturday, the brewery employs 15 people. The 600-litre brew house produces four year-round beers – the Forrest Pale Ale, Silvertop, Irish Red and Stout – which are on tap and available to take away, as well as a stable of seasonal beers and one-offs, such as the Roadknight Wet Hop Lager, brewed using hops grown on Matt's own farm, where he lives with his wife and two children. The hops have been cultivated from wild rootstock remnant of an industry that disappeared in the 1950s. "We could have bought a generic variety of hops and grown them, but we wanted to grow something with local heritage," Matt says.

That focus on local produce extends to the kitchen, where the menu includes locally sourced lamb and seafood, such as Portarlington mussels cooked in beer, butter, bacon and fresh herbs, and lamb ribs with beer grain dukkah, carrot and ginger puree, pickled fennel and pomegranate sticky sauce. The specials board regularly features beef from Matt's own herd. "I'd like to think we're a fair step above the average pub grub and that we complement our beers with really good food," Matt says.

Outside, local farmers Miles and Annie Hazel are enjoying a beer in the autumn sun. "We've just been for a beautiful bike ride and knowing the brewery is here, well, it's like a little oasis," Annie says, smiling into the sun. "It's the light at the end of the tunnel," Miles adds. "You go and do your work-out, the bush is fantastic, it's a cracking day, and then there's that ale on the horizon."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: An autumn sun sets over Forrest Brewery; co-owners, siblings Sharon and Matt Bradshaw; the rustic interior; ocean trout tataki.