

RedGround



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Location: Oberon

Manager: Neil and Jill O'Grady

Farm produce: Truffles

Size of farm: 24 hectares (60 acres)

Website: redground.com.au

Why we decided to diversify into agritourism

We bought our small farm in 2012. We planned to grow some type of gourmet ingredient with high commercial value such as wasabi or saffron that would be suitable for the small property – we settled on truffles. At the time we both had off-farm incomes.

Our truffiere started producing four years ago. To spread our income across the year we decided to grow four varieties of truffles that are harvested one per season. This means we can host truffle hunting tours for 8-10 months of the year.

We built a cottage when we moved to the farm, and lived in it while building our main house. Planning rules in Oberon allow a granny flat (two dwellings on the same property), and we thought we'd use the cottage later on as a short term rental accommodation.

In 2022, wet weather wiped out our harvest, and this made me start thinking about agritourism as a diversified income stream to help overcome the inevitable lean times in farming. I also had the goal of having an on-farm job.

Agritourism offering



Farm experiences

- Farm tour (truffle experience): truffle hunt, truffle tasting
- Cooking workshops
- Truffle dining experience
- TruffleFest event
- Photo shoots
- Private events, meetings, micro-weddings



Accommodation

- Two-bedroom cottage

An attractive open kitchen and dining area hosts cooking and eating experiences, and is available as a space to hire for meetings and private events for 40-50 people.



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How and when we started our agritourism business

I called other truffle hunt providers around Australia to learn about best practice. I planned to make our experiences luxurious, fun, exciting, and full of new experiences (tastings and learnings) so guests will rave about them to their friends and on social media. I also always ask our guests what we could do better and ask them to write a review to help our small business become better known.

I developed a business plan and did cost analysis at the beginning, and I have spreadsheets on everything – cost, time involved, break even point, sales – I always know where I am financially at any point in time.

Planning approval

“Initially I thought I could develop my tourism offering without consulting Council planners.”

I had a farm shed with wash bay and toilet for processing truffles, and thought I could turn it into a tourism facility. However an agritourism workshop I attended made me realise I had to check with Council to see if I needed approval, so I met with Council's Director of Planning and the Planning Manager. I am used to reading legislation, and I thought it would be possible to get approval quite simply.

I found out I had to submit a development approval (DA) application to change the use of the shed to a truffle processing facility that would then be allowed to be used for agritourism under the new state agritourism legislation.

For the cooking demonstrations and tastings, I also needed to have a commercial kitchen, a food safety license, and a liquor license.

At that time, the changes to the state planning legislation to facilitate agritourism were new, and Council was hiring external planners as they had many DA applications to process, and I was told I couldn't do things that the legislation said that I could do. There were also conditions attached to my DA that weren't applicable as they were for a residential dwelling, and they would have added to the cost of my development.

I went back to Council to ask to have the conditions removed. I ended up hiring a pro-agritourism planning consultant for advice. She helped me meet with Council's General Manager, and the Director and Manager of Planning, who agreed the conditions I questioned weren't applicable. However, unfortunately, requesting an amendment to my DA to remove the conditions was an additional cost.

Looking back, I would have found it helpful to have Council's Tourism Manager in my planning meetings, to help advocate for me.



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Farm tours

I have to hunt for truffles 3-4 days a week for most of the year, so my farm tour integrates well with my farming rhythm. The agritourism tours also develop the farm's future customers by teaching guests how to use truffles.

The three-hour farm tours include:

- Learning about biosecurity as guests scrub their shoes on a cleaning mat then stand in a disinfectant footbath for 10 seconds to remove any fungal spores before joining the tour.
- Learning about the endangered ecological community (Cool Temperate Grassy Woodland) on the farm that we are restoring.
- How I train my truffle-hunting dogs.
- How to harvest, wash and grade truffles – tours are limited to 16 people so everyone can experience digging up a truffle.
- What to look for when buying truffles.
- Tasting truffles with a variety of foods, and learning how to pair truffles with other foods.
- Learning how to cook with truffles.

Learnings

- I work seven days a week in winter. I manage our accommodation and tours myself, as well as run the farm – administration, accounting, bookings, communications, answering questions, and so on.
- To offer tourism experiences, you have to be able to be tolerant of sometimes foolish behaviour – the customer is always right, even if they are running towards wildlife or bringing their dogs when they have been asked not to.
- In our region, due to the Black Summer bushfires, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find insurance for bushfires. Only one insurance company (Lloyds of London) will provide us with insurance for our operations in our postcode, but our insurance cost has increased year on year quite significantly.

How our agritourism business grew over time

GETTING SUPPORT FROM THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

We joined the [Oberon Business and Tourism Association](#) (OBTA), and I connected with Oberon Council's Tourism Manager, who would send me tourism development information.

BUILDING MY SKILLS IN TOURISM

I started to attend tourism workshops and trainings, and connect with the support offered by the regional and state tourism organisations: Destination Central West NSW and Destination NSW.

"This helped me grow my tourism knowledge and my business."

LEARNING TO SELL BY PAYING COMMISSION

More recently I have been learning how to work with international and online travel agents through trainings provided by Destination NSW. I learned to set up my online booking system to sell through agents, paying a commission.

Then I went to an international trade show and I got many forward bookings from that. Destination NSW has helped me manage the interest from travel agents. There is a lot of interest because I am offering something unique and high quality.

GETTING BUSINESS ADVICE

I have often asked for help from the business advisors at BizHQ in Bathurst and through Service NSW, such as for advice on my website, marketing, social media, and importing products such as truffle shavers that I sell to my guests. Every time I wanted to expand, I would find a Service NSW advisor with the expertise I needed, and book a free one-hour meeting with them.

OFFERING WHAT IS MOST PROFITABLE

In 2024 I accepted every request I received – garden clubs, birthday parties, and so on. In 2025 I looked at my accounting software to figure out what offerings are most worth doing, considering my time and how much money I make for the effort I put in. Now I politely decline what I know is the most effort for the least reward.

COLLABORATION WITH OTHER BUSINESSES

"I do a lot of collaboration with others in the local tourism industry. We do a good job of working together to encourage visitors to stay longer in Oberon, and spend more here."

I share with my guests about other businesses they might need – accommodations, the local taxi, or events that are on.

I attend meetings of the local tourism association OBTA where we ask each other to promote our initiatives, and we engage on each other's social media.

Where we are today

When the agritourism and farm business became a full time job, I quit my off-farm job.

My tours were oversubscribed by the end of first season, so I started private truffle hunts.

I've also clarified which types of guests I want to focus on attracting more of.

Now I'm managing expectations and my workload so I can cope and deliver an exceptional experience for my guests every time.

Advice for farmers looking to diversify into agritourism

- People want something different, and they want interactive, immersive experiences, not to just look at stuff.
- Although I offer to host meetings and micro-weddings, this offering has never gained any traction. I think this is because there is already a glut of on-farm wedding venues, and business meeting organisers want nearby 5-star accommodation, which we don't have in Oberon.
- Make sure you offer something unique.
- I strongly recommend using a pro-agritourism planning consultant to support you to be compliant.
- I undertook sustainability accreditation for the truffiere which helped me assess my business and learn how it could be improved, and where I could create efficiencies. Visitors are interested in buying sustainable experiences.
- Surprisingly, many people turn up because they want to use our EV (electric vehicle) charger – that has been another way to attract guests.