

Gardens



A crop of globe artichokes thrives in the kitchen garden.

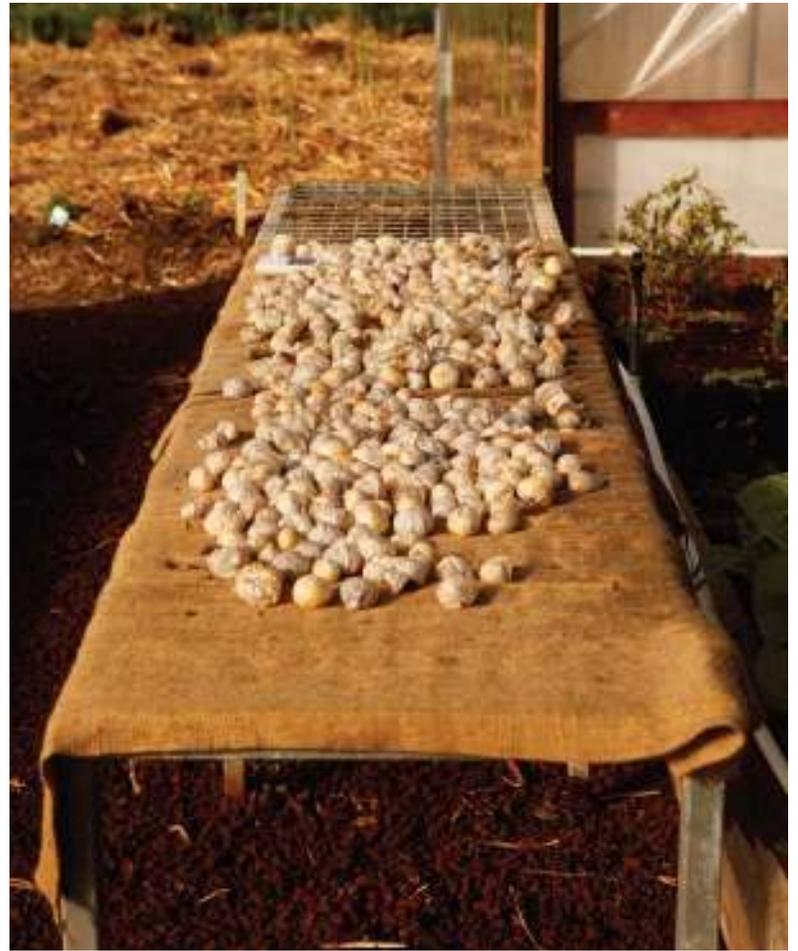
opposite page Resident gardener Michelle Shanahan at work.

Made To Order

text: **Angela Tufvesson** photography: **Courtesy of The Royal Mail Hotel**

This is a kitchen garden operating at the elite level, exclusively supplying one of the country's most celebrated restaurants. No pressure!



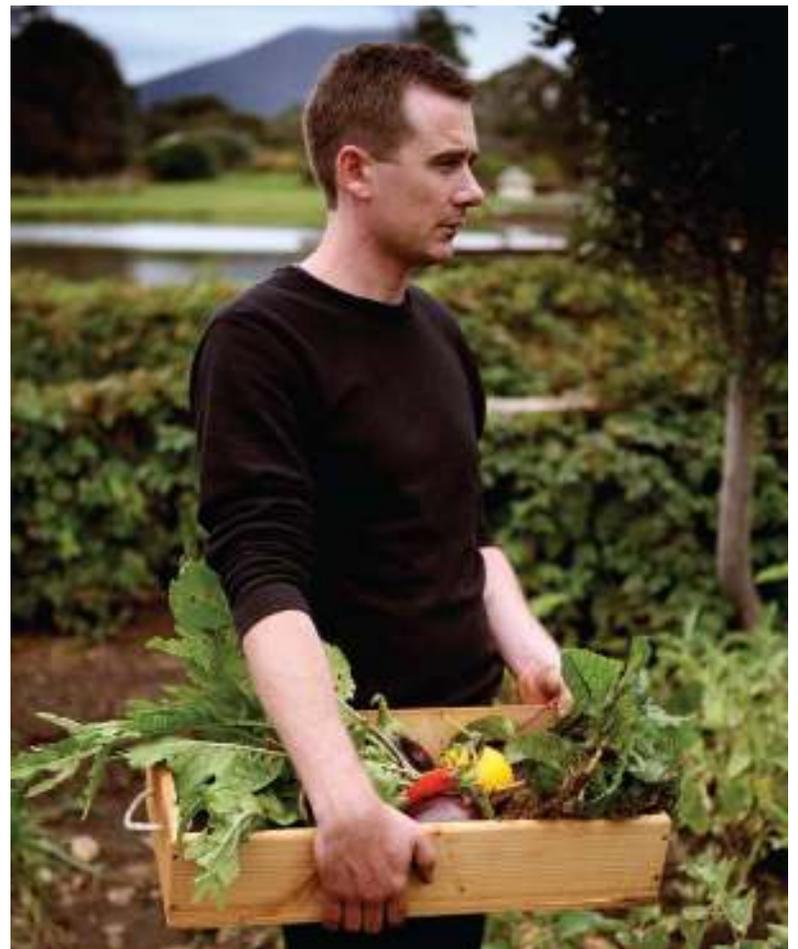


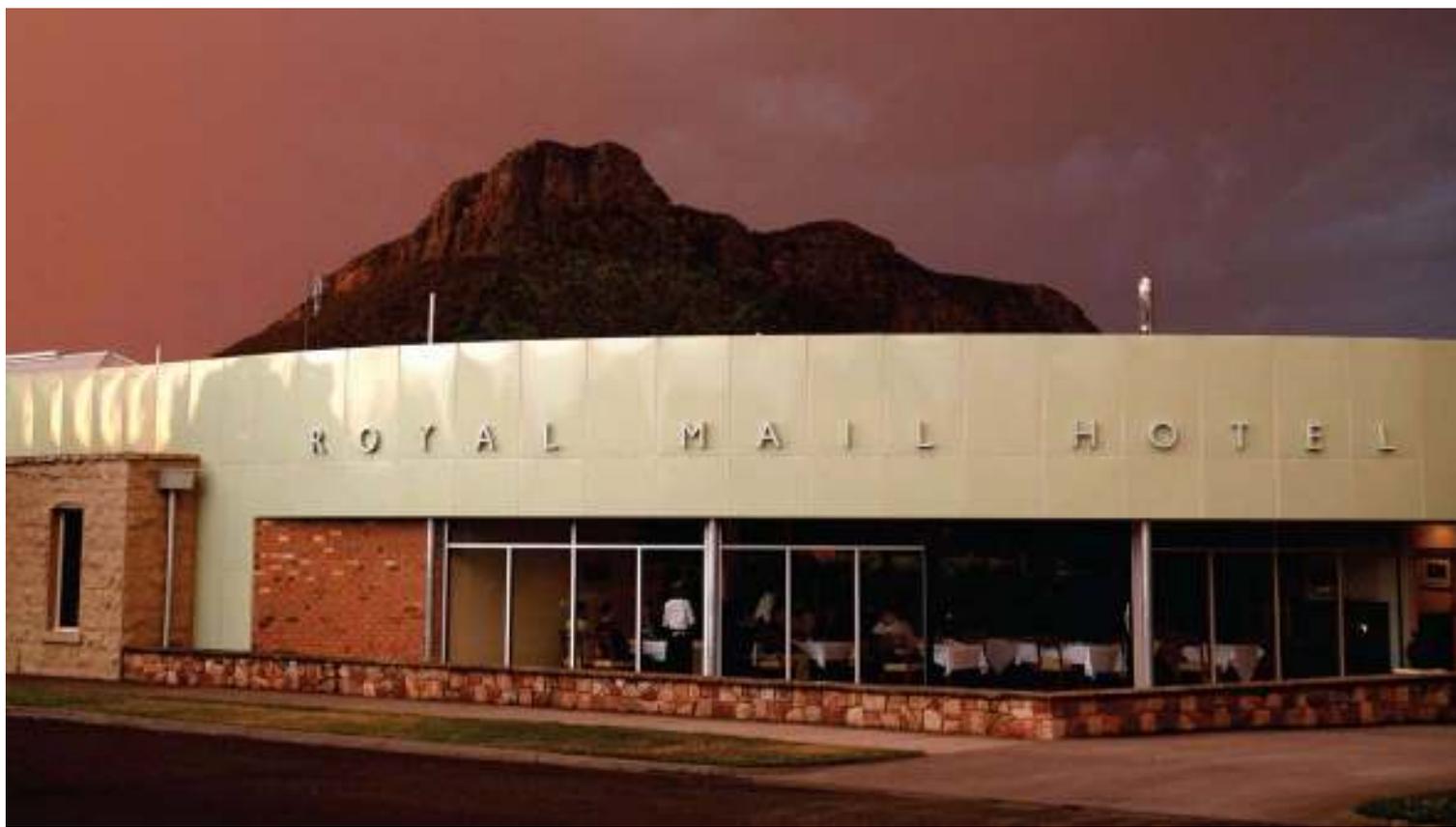
In the age of molecular gastronomy, fusion cuisine and deconstructed classics, most award-winning restaurants set up shop in our cities, alongside a rich array of global ingredients and the sophisticated clientele to match. So it's a surprise to learn that one of Australia's most celebrated restaurants lies three hours west of Melbourne in the Grampians region in rural Victoria.

Originally established in 1855, the Royal Mail Hotel dominates the main drag of Dunkeld – with a population of just 450 – and boasts a swag of awards, including three chefs' hats in The Age Good Food Guide 2013. The restaurant's main point of difference, its kitchen garden, highlights the rationale behind its regional locale and modern, produce-oriented cuisine.

About 90 per cent of the produce served in the eight-course tasting menu is picked fresh from the kitchen garden – the largest and most productive in Australia. "The menu for the restaurant is very much dictated by the kitchen garden," says resident gardener Michelle Shanahan. "The head chef and I work in collaboration with each other. He bases his menu on what we're growing."

The one-acre garden is complemented by two orchards and an olive grove, which Shanahan says have been running for about five years. "Because of our remote location, the head chef





The Royal Mail Hotel dominates the main street in Dunkeld. **opposite page top left** Freshly picked baby carrots. **right** Some produce is dried before being used in the restaurant. **bottom** The chefs pick their own fruit and veg for the restaurant each day.

wanted to grow organic and heirloom vegetables and he wanted to grow a broad range so it gave his menu much broader scope.”

The majority of plants are propagated by seed on heated trays, and then spend a few weeks outside in seedling beds to “harden off” before being planted in the garden. A hothouse provides the flexibility to grow produce that would otherwise struggle in the warm temperate climate or is subject to short growing seasons, like lemongrass, tomatoes and Shanahan’s latest exotic challenge: wasabi.

Last year, she grew a whopping 26 varieties of tomatoes. “Before last year I’d never grown a tomato by seed in my life so I planted every seed I could get my hands on and I finished up with something like 520 tomato plants. We planted about 480, which was way too much. This year I plan on planting 260.”

The garden uses organic techniques such as biological pest control, harvesting recycled water, feeding the soil with three big mounds of compost from the restaurant’s vegetable waste, green manure and crop rotation.

In one corner of the garden, a healthy crop of broad beans and peas follows last summer’s tomatoes. “You usually always follow a legume crop after tomatoes, and once the peas and broad beans have finished I’ll cut them off at ground level – I won’t pull the roots out because they have nitrogen nodules on them which will

feed the next plants,” says Shanahan.

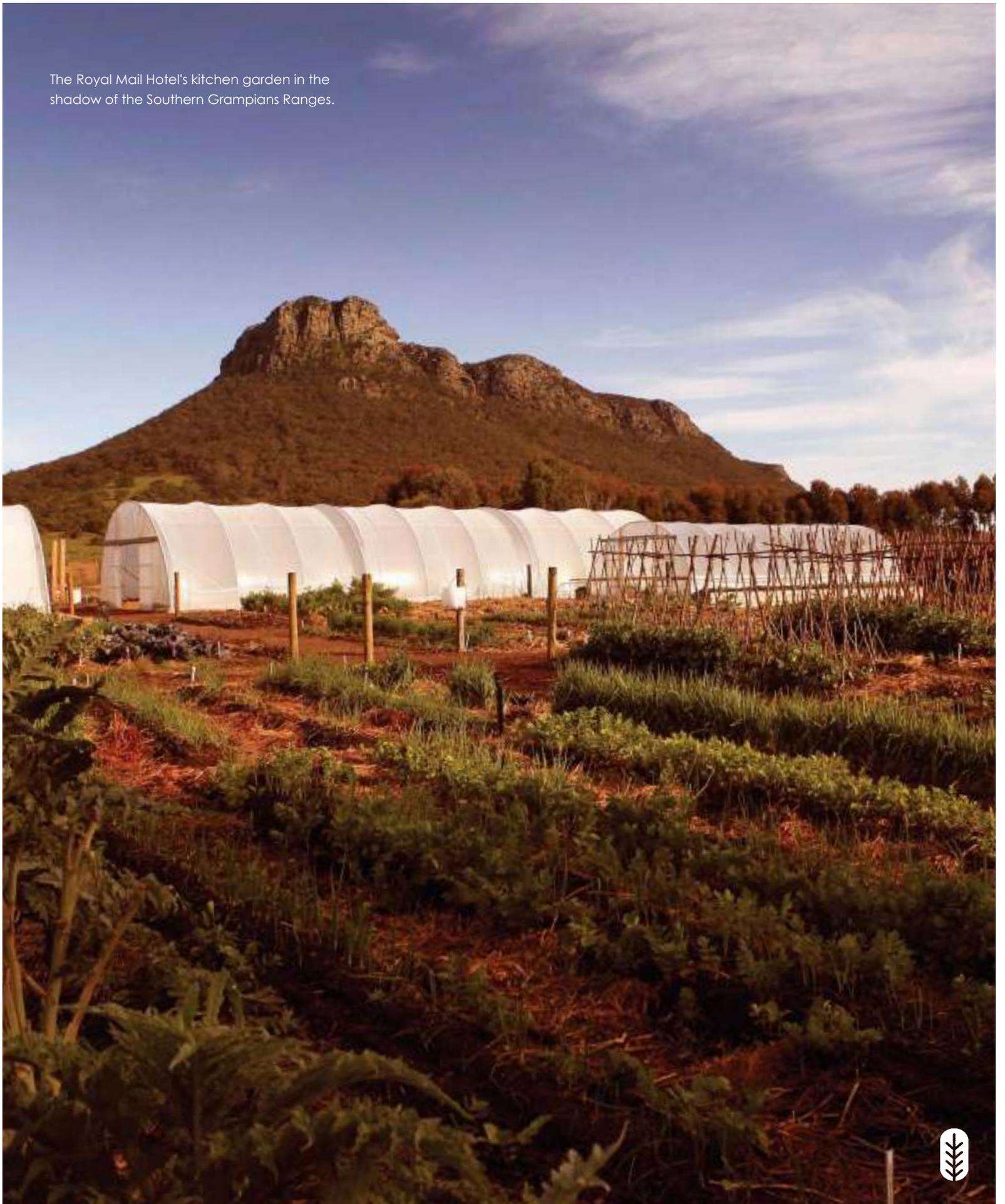
Three noisy Indian Runner ducks control snails and slugs – which aren’t the only pests lurking in the garden. The chefs spend up to an hour and a half harvesting fresh produce each day but the desire for young leaves and micro vegetables means they occasionally pick seedlings that are off limits, prompting Shanahan to put up “do not pick” signs in the hothouse.

At the other end of the growing cycle, Shanahan waits until the chefs are finished with a crop before planting the next variety on the rotation. “For example, these brassicas that have finished flowering, normally you would pull them out but I don’t pull anything out. I leave them until the chefs have finished with them completely, until they’ve taken any flowers, seeds or roots of the plant that are left and that are edible.”

Ultimately, a focus on soil rather than produce is key to the garden’s continual supply of fresh fruit and vegetables. “We have a line of thinking that we grow soil, we don’t grow vegetables,” says Shanahan. “Anything that comes out of the garden comes back into the garden in the form of compost. If you’ve got good soil and good nutrient balance, vegetables are easier to grow, and you grow a much better vegetable nutritionally.”

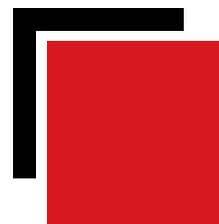
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The Royal Mail Hotel's kitchen garden in the shadow of the Southern Grampians Ranges.





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