



Nathalie Craig prepares entree during a cooking class.

Kitchen classroom

A Riverina cooking school is giving country people the opportunity to travel the world in the kitchen.

STORY THERESE HALL

When Tania Sibrey decided to open a cooking school in her home town of Wagga Wagga, NSW, she was aware that most of her customers would come from within the Riverina district. “We weren’t expecting to attract a city market,” she says. For many foodie start-ups, a five-hour drive from a major centre may have presented a problem. But not for Tania, who firmly believed that her success would be determined by her location in the Riverina. “Why shouldn’t country people have the same experiences available to

people from metropolitan areas?” she asks. “I’d had great experiences when I’d travelled, but I was frustrated that there weren’t many great food-based experiences in the Riverina.”

Tania’s friends rallied when she put out the word about her new venture in 2011. “Within 24 hours we had the first few classes booked out and Food I Am was born,” she says. During her first three years of business, Tania hosted cooking classes in community halls, local TAFE facilities and her home kitchen. “We had a nice long bench,” she says with a smile.

Now the business is based in a custom-made facility just outside town, and offers about 140 classes a year, as well as several annual overseas food tours. “We’re really excited to be where we are now,” Tania says.

It’s been quite a journey for the home cook and mother of two (and step-mum of four), who had previously worked in sales and marketing. Although not a trained chef herself, Tania’s mother was obsessed with food.

“An amazing cook and teacher, my mother really came into her own in the 1970s when she started cooking Chinese banquets,” Tania says. “That was followed by her obsession with Lebanese, Indian, Thai and French cuisine. We travelled the globe in Mum’s kitchen!”

Following her mother’s international lead, Tania offers classes in Thai, Spanish, Balinese, Italian and Vietnamese regional fare, some of which are led by Wagga-based Asian cuisine expert Soon Lee Low, and others by visiting chefs, such as Spanish food specialist Amy Dewhurst and

Italian food aficionado Melina Puntoriero. “We might teach an Italian feast or a Thai banquet. We have baking essentials classes and a two-day salami-making course,” Tania says. “The salami-making is really popular. We have people travelling all the way from Sydney for that.”

While locals continue to support Food I Am, they’re now joined by food lovers from Sydney, as well as Orange, Griffith and Albury. “The word is spreading,” Tania says. “About 30–40 percent come from outside of Wagga now, travelling anything from an hour to five hours to get here.”

One of Tania’s regular students is local account manager Peta Gilholme. “The classes are very hands-on, very friendly, and you’re involved in every part of the process,” she says. “It’s become a bit of an annual tradition for Mum and me to go to a class. We literally get out of one class and book the next one.”

Peta, who moved from Sydney to Wagga six years ago, compares Food I Am favourably to cooking schools she’s

attended in Tasmania and Sydney. “There are high-calibre chefs, like Christine Mansfield, and you get great teaching and a good lunch,” she says.

Every year Tania leads week-long food tours to Vietnam, Italy and Spain, which focus on artisan producers and culinary experiences, as well as architecture and culture. She also hosts one-day food treks for small groups, visiting some of the Riverina’s best producers, winemakers, food stores, restaurants and cafes.

As well as cooking classes and food-oriented travel, Food I Am hosts private events and team-building corporate events. According to Tania, people bond really well over food. “We get quite a few girls’ groups on weekends away,” she says. “And many locals give vouchers at Christmas to family members so they can do a family class together.”

Food I am
0427 250 498
<https://foodiam.com.au>