

# MARKET FORCES



Picture: James Howe

**D**anny Parletta is a third-generation farmer. You won't, however, find a drawing bloke in dusty Blundstones. Parletta lives in the suburbs. He keeps miniature fox terriers, not kelpies. Circumnavigating his property on foot would take minutes.

His is the world of urban agriculture, where properties are measured in square metres, and fences separate food-growing land from carports and swimming pools. It's a world that is fast disappearing under the relentless spread of suburbia.

But, tucked away in isolated corners, there are still some producers digging in against the trend to sell-and-subdivide. Parletta, the 30-year-old grandson of an Italian market gardener is one of them. He and his Vietnamese fiancée Nga Nguyen recently opened a fruit and veg store in Kilburn to sell his family's produce. And when he's not in the shop, Danny can still be found tilling, planting, and harvesting on his family's Athelstone property, which may soon become Adelaide's last true suburban farm.

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WORDS JAMES HOWE

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few other things, but nothing else works for me," he says, thoughtfully binding several spring onions into a bunch and dropping it into a plastic crate. "I keep coming back here — so, I thought, I might as well just stay here."

He's a rarity. While researching this story, I was given a tip on a market garden in the western suburbs — a small block on a Lockleys backstreet, purported to be one of the last of its kind remaining in the area. I arrived a few days later to find the property filled with weeds, nothing to show for its recent past save a few rusty ploughshares amid the nettles.

A man wheeling a barrow of firewood paused to tell me the old farmer had recently died, and that the block was destined for imminent subdivision. It's a story that is being played out right across the city. Nowhere is the demise of market gardening more apparent than in my own neighbourhood. Campbelltown once had as many market gardens as bus stops — today, on my count, there are two left.

So what is the future for Adelaide's market gardens? To find out the real answer to these questions, you



- A** Danny Parletta tends his Athelstone property
- B** Maria Belperio's market garden in Paradise has gradually been sold for housing
- C** How tomatoes are grown at DiVineRipe in Two Wells today
- D** Glass houses growing tomatoes at West Beach in 1946, before the airport was built

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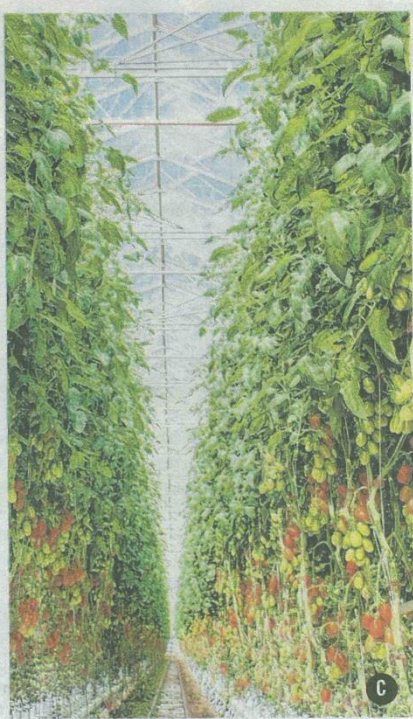
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have to go back to the beginning, to where Adelaide's market gardens first came from.

Italy, 1954: 13-year-old Maria Mercorella (now Belperio) and her family are preparing to leave home. They've sold their 20 sheep, four cows, two goats, two donkeys, their pig and their paddock of wheat. The farm house they'll keep for a while, because they don't know if the air in Australia will kill the children. But despite their apprehension at journeying to an unknown land, they're glad to be leaving. Because, if all goes well, Adelaide's fruitful soil and plentiful water will provide the Mercorellas with a unique opportunity: for the first time ever, Maria's family will be able to cultivate more food than they need to eat. For the first time ever, they will be able to turn a profit.

Arriving in Australia, Maria's father rents a 10-acre property in the eastern suburbs. Maria works hard on her parents' farm, and boxes onions for a neighbour, earning \$3.50 a day. She marries, and purchases a five-acre plot of land in Paradise for \$30,000 with her husband Pat Belperio. They work hard: from 5am till dark every day, they till the land, growing parsnips, carrots, potatoes and herbs.

Today, Maria and her husband are in their 70s. Their farm, the only market garden remaining in the area, is overshadowed by a giant "for sale" sign. Several years ago, the family began subdividing the plot and building homes for a retirement village. If they manage to sell all of the 15 homes planned for the site (the family is hoping to fetch \$400,000 for each home), there will be nothing left but a small piece of land for Maria to potter around on in her old age. She wants to keep this, because she knows she won't be able to tolerate being surrounded by dense housing. She's sad to see the demise of her garden, a lifetime labour of love, but is philosophical about the change.



Picture: Supplied



Picture: The Advertiser photo: Kitchcock

"We're old - we can't do it anymore," she shrugs. "One day or another, we're going." Maria says her sons - who own a fruit and vegetable wholesale business - are not interested in market gardening. I ask Maria's son Vince Belperio why this is the case. He talks of supermarket monopolies, the soaring cost of water, and neighbours who endlessly complain about the mechanics of market gardening. "We're being forced out," he says. "Every time we want to spray, or fertilise or rotary hoe, we have to go around and tell all the neighbours - you can't work like that."

Once the mainstay of market gardening in Adelaide, Italian families like the Belperios are disappearing. Younger generations, who have had opportunities their parents and grandparents would once only have dreamed of, have moved on to a different, more modern way of life. So, when the older generation dies or retires, it almost always means subdivision and the permanent loss of the garden.

But, in Adelaide's market gardening heartland Virginia, a new group has exploded onto the scene, saving the region's fields and greenhouses from falling into disuse.

In 1982, Tuan Bui spent five hellish days on a sinking boat, praying for his life. He and 109 other refugees had boarded the boat in Vietnam, hoping to get to Indonesia. But a storm sprang up, smashing a hole in the side of the craft, threatening to break it in two. The passengers simply stuffed their clothes in the hole and prayed. "The Christians were praying to the Virgin Mary and Jesus, and the Buddhists were praying to Buddha," says Bui. "I wouldn't take \$100 million to take that boat again."

The wounded vessel miraculously limped into Indonesia, and eventually Bui and his family were granted asylum in Australia. Bui's parents' English was not good enough for them to own a business, as they had in Vietnam, so they decided to try their hand at farming. Having learnt the basics of horticulture on a relative's property, they took out a loan to buy a 6.5-acre market garden in Virginia. The venture was successful: Bui's parents sold enough capsicums and tomatoes to send five of their six children through school and university.

But Bui never went to university. He prefers to work with his hands, and doesn't like the thought of being stuck in an office. Still, farming is a hard life,

he admits. "Some years, if we have good weather, good prices and a good crop, we'll make money – but if the weather makes the plants go funny or die, we make a loss."

Bui says Virginia, previously farmed almost exclusively by Italian and Greek immigrants, is now 90 per cent Vietnamese. But as with Italian families, the tradition is already on the wane in the Vietnamese community. "I don't think the young generation wants to do farming anymore, because it's too hard," says Bui. "Especially in the summer – when it's 40 degrees outside, it's 50-55 inside. My children say 'farming's too hot daddy, and too dirty.' I don't know what the future will be like in another 15-20 years, because the kids don't want to work on the farms."

The disappearance of market gardens would be a blow to Adelaide's food scene. Increasingly, locally sourced produce is in demand. Stirling's The Locavore, for example, operates on the principle that no ingredient on the menu travels more than 160km from field to kitchen. Chef Freddie Monaghan says small-scale local farming produces a richer and more compelling product than large-scale agriculture. "A lot of things that the smaller producers grow are not necessarily as refined and as clinical as the bigger producers – it's not the perfect shaped strawberry, or the most wonderfully shaped cucumber – but there's a bit more flavour, a bit more depth," he says.

For many chefs, having a close relationship with the producer is vital, as it allows for a dialogue on the types of ingredients grown and the way in which they are produced. But Duncan Welgemoed, of Bistro Dom in the city, plans to take it one step further: he and his apprentice John Ricciotti are in the final stages of planning a market garden in the middle of the Adelaide CBD. Welgemoed and Ricciotti, along with chefs from other restaurants and city residents, plan to use it to grow vegetables.

Welgemoed's hope is to farm niche products that are difficult to source from the bigger suppliers, such as baby coriander, pea-sized radishes and beetroots, tiny turnips and cucumber flowers. The council has given the green light for the project to go ahead, and Welgemoed says final sign-off from the Waymouth St property owner is imminent.

Adelaide's Independent Senator Nick Xenophon is an outspoken advocate of developing the Adelaide CBD to prevent market gardens and peri-urban agricultural land being swallowed by urban sprawl. Two years ago he attended a protest against the Seaford Heights housing development, which was slated to be built on prime agricultural soil between Adelaide's southern suburbs and McLaren Vale.

The protest involved "guerrilla gardeners" planting a crop of broad beans to symbolise the agricultural value of the land. The demonstration was creative, but ultimately unsuccessful. Xenophon says this kind of urban sprawl is ecologically destructive, as it forces farming into such far-flung locales as the Riverland, which puts unnecessary kilometres on the food we eat in Adelaide.

"We are going along with this heedless and headless expansion into the outer suburbs, chewing up prime agricultural land with all its environmental costs," says Xenophon. "Why is it that Adelaide – with a sixth of the population of Paris – has an urban footprint two or three times greater?"

Instead, Xenophon advocates repopulating Adelaide's city centre. He argues that 80 years ago, even before the advent of high-rise living, the CBD housed more than double the 21,000 people who currently live there. "There's no reason why we couldn't repopulate the square mile of Adelaide and have 100,000 people living here in the next 10 years... could you imagine the buzz in Adelaide if we had 100,000 people living here rather than 21,000?"

But for Adelaide's once-thriving urban agricultural land, it is mostly too late. There are too few large plots left, and too few like Danny Parletta and Maria Belperio to devote their toil to them. ●

## URBAN ORCHARDS



As traditional market gardening wanes in Adelaide, **backyard veggie patches** are making a comeback, particularly among those concerned with issues of sustainability. Of course, most Adelaide gardeners are only able to rely on a **small patch of dirt**, which naturally limits the quantity and number of food varieties able to be grown.

**Enter the Urban Orchard:** launched in Adelaide in **2007**, the concept allows people to **swap** their garden produce with **fruit and vegetables** grown by **neighbours**. For example, if someone harvests a bumper crop of **mandarins**, they can turn their excess fruit

into **pumpkins, spinach and tomatoes** at the **monthly Urban Orchard meet**, such as the one **Joel Catchlove, Tiff Schultz and Nat Wiseman**, above, and **Mij Tanith**, below, attend at **Clarence Park Urban Orchard**. The concept, which originated in **Melbourne 10 years ago**, was first launched in **Clarence Park by Friends of the Earth Adelaide and the Goodwood Goodfood Co-op**. Today, meets operate across the city. **Narelle Walker, of Thebarton**, helped to set up Adelaide's first Urban Orchard. As a volunteer for **Friends of the Earth's Reclaim the Food Chain** – a project that seeks to promote sustainable food production – she was attracted to the Urban Orchard's low environmental impact, given that nearly no transport is required to bring the food from garden to plate.

But Narelle says there are other, equally compelling arguments for **small-scale urban food production**. "The industrial agricultural system has reduced the range of foods that are available, because (supermarkets) go for certain types of food that travel well, that hold well in cold storage, or that can be kept for a long time," she says. Many foods that don't appear in the shops readily grow in **Adelaide's backyard veggie patches**: some of the flavoursome oddities that have passed over the tables of the Urban Orchard include **American grapes** (which Narelle says taste like jelly beans), **custard apples** and **Warrigal greens**, a leafy edible ground cover that is native to New Zealand. "It's quite empowering to think you can get even half your evening meal out of the garden," says Narelle.

The Urban Orchard was designed partly to prevent fruit and vegetables that are excess to a household's needs from going to **waste**. "I'd lived in the inner west and other places, and there are quite a lot of fruit trees that would fruit even without attention," she says. Chef **Duncan Welgemoed** of **Bistro Dom** (pictured below, left, with **Tim Weber**) has another way of helping people to get rid of their excess seasonal produce: he swaps fruit and vegetables for meal tickets. "You can drive around suburbs like **Prospect and St Peters**, and down the laneways and there's so much brilliant produce just hanging over the walls," he says. "We've got a bit of a bartering system where we say to anyone who's got loads of **oranges or quinces** or whatever glut on their property, 'pick as much as you can, bring it to the front door and I'll give you **food vouchers** – you can have a **meal for two and bottle of wine**.'"

