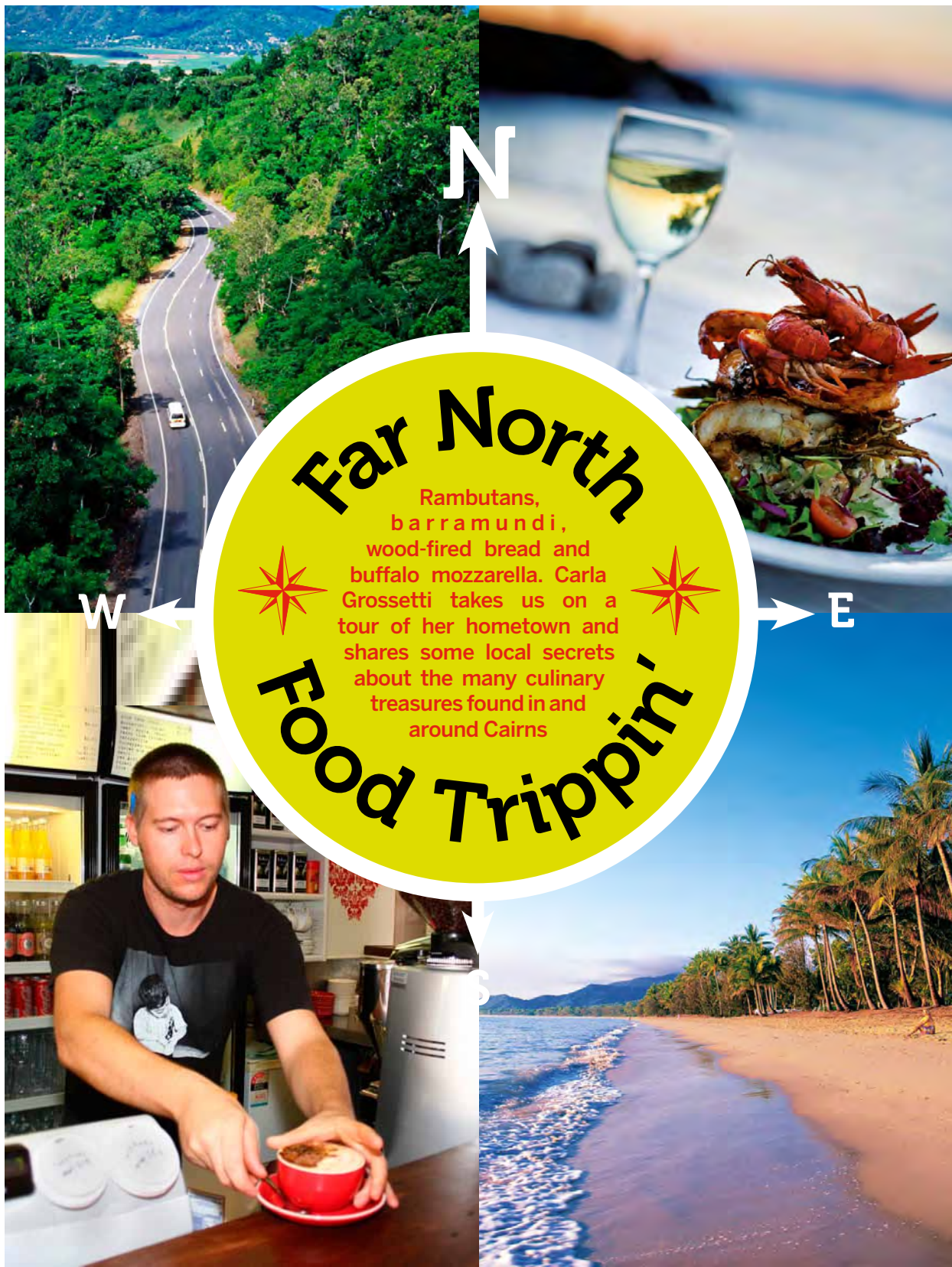


PHOTOGRAPHY TOP LEFT: LONELY PLANET, BOTTOM RIGHT: CORBIS, TOP RIGHT: TOURISM TROPICAL NORTH QUEENSLAND





**T**he sun is warm, my cappuccino is frothy, and I'm admiring the graffiti mural edging the alley near Caffiend, a fabulously cosmopolitan café in the centre of Cairns.

As a dedicated gourmand, I take an obscene amount of pleasure in the fact that – despite having left the Far North 15 years ago – I am still in the loop when it comes to local knowledge. It's largely thanks to my far northern network of family, friends and former colleagues at the local newspaper that I still know where to find that cult café, the world-class restaurant with a view or that plucky place for a sunset cocktail.

Oliver James is the owner of Caffiend, which is located in a lively little arcade a step away from the scantily clad backpacker scene down by the boardwalk. Even though brunch is in full swing, there's no rush. Inside, there's a muddle of laidback locals gathered around the large communal table.

Chef Laura Dall'Alba's menu is simple, seasonal and sublime: it features lots of fresh, locally sourced ingredients as well as an array of rustic condiments – from tomato relish to beetroot jam – that the 22-year-old concocts from scratch. The best-selling dish on the lunch menu is the burger: wood-fired bread and a spiced pork and beef patty topped with garlic aioli, caramelised onion, fresh baby rocket and tomato.

The culinary pleasures in this, my hometown, are many and extend far beyond the confines of the City Arcade. Our visits to the tropical north always include some of the local attractions – reef, rainforest and relatives – but food is also a major focus.

Nearby from Caffiend is Rusty's, which has morphed from a fairly low-key market to a place that – from Friday to Saturday – is now the city's focal point. The colourful hangout attracts bikers, backpackers and barefooted hippies and everyone else in between. Rusty's is an institution. It's where everyone goes to do their weekly shopping and catch up on the local gossip.

After enjoying a locally-grown blend of coffee, ground and brewed by barista Billy, we sample some hummus, buy some fresh-made herb pasta and a range of exotic fruits – from hairy little rambutans to star fruit and red papaya. A woman with a flowery hat hands me a plate of strawberries. "Try some," she gestures with a grin. The bakers, cheese-makers and yes, even candlestick-

Bliss: fish and chips by the sea



PHOTOGRAPHY TOURISM TROPICAL NORTH QUEENSLAND

OUR VISITS TO THE TROPICAL NORTH ALWAYS INCLUDE SOME OF THE LOCAL ATTRACTIONS BUT FOOD IS ALSO A MAJOR FOCUS

Craig Squires



I still know where to find that cult café, the world-class restaurant with a view or that plucky place for a sunset cocktail

A salad of Moreton Bay Bugs at Harrison's



Working farms



The graffiti wall near Caffiend



makers jostle for space alongside stalls selling indigenous specialities. In another boho backstreet is a nonsense newcomer, Bellocale. Here James McLean – who was head chef at Brisbane's Bella Cusi restaurant when it won Best Mid-Size New Restaurant in the 2010 Restaurant & Catering Industry Association awards – serves food that makes much of the seasonal splendour. The 29-year-old, whose signature dish is the pappardelle bugs with leeks, ginger, garlic and chilli and flamed with cognac says he is "Italian by default", as the cuisine is now part of his own culinary heritage. McLean says cooking great Italian food is simple: "You just have to source the best and freshest local ingredients." Another strong advocate for using regional food on menus is Craig Squires of Ochre Restaurant, who is intent on maintaining a sustainable menu. "There

is nothing gimmicky about having emu, crocodile and kangaroo on my menu. It's healthy, and good for the environment and local economy," he says. Standouts on the Ochre menu include the twice-cooked Mareeba pork shoulder, the papaya and bamboo shoot salad on beetle leaf and the Wattleseed pavlova. It is at Squires' urging that my husband and I conduct a self-drive tour of the Atherton Tablelands to meet some of the growers that have inspired his menu. My family have a holiday home perched on a hillside next to Lake Eacham National Park and, as a kid, I spent many a weekend mooching around the nearby markets in Yungabarra. It's while visiting these little village markets that I realise how much the area has evolved. Yes, there are still the stalls with towering sculptures of pineapples, tomatoes, avocados and mangoes. There are also tables brimming with bric-a-brac and the usual bounty of seasonal fruit. But as well as the apple-cheeked farmers showing off the biggest and best produce, there are now a large cluster of





We visited a herb farm in Kuranda, supped macchiatos at the Skybury Coffee Plantation and sampled mango wine at Mt Uncle's Distillery

Locally-grown coffee

Skybury Coffee

sophisticated providores and food vendors offering everything from rainforest honey to homemade chutneys, cheeses, micro herbs and wood-fired bread.

Food trails are now big business in North Queensland. Nola Craig is the founder of the Australian Tropical Foods website, a food and wine portal that features listings of farmers' markets, industry news, an up-to-date seasonal calendar and self-driving routes that criss-cross from Mirriwini to Mareeba, Palm Cove to Port Douglas.

Her self-driving Tableland tour is wonderful: we visited a herb farm in Kuranda, supped macchiatos at the Skybury Coffee Plantation, sampled mango wine at Mt Uncle's Distillery and a cheese platter at Gallo's Dairyland in Malanda.

So many farmers have now diversified to meet the needs of both the local and export market. Where there were once tobacco plantations, there are now macadamia nut farms, buffaloes being bred to make fresh mozzarella and aquaculture farms selling everything from red-claw crayfish to eels.

The restaurant and bar scene "up north" is certainly as diverse as the region's many

micro-climates - and there are a range of very distinct spaces with varying levels of swishness. As well as the lovely Nu-Nus at Peppers Beach Club in Palm Cove, try Hanumans at the Hilton Cairns Hotel and Harrisons in Port Douglas.

Also worth a nudge is Wink Restaurant, run by chef Leon Walker, who has worked alongside Marco Pierre White and Gordon Ramsay and other big names. If it's affordable, rustic fare you are after, try Rising Sun Bar & Bistro in Palm Cove (Nu-Nu's sister restaurant), as well as the low-key Ganbaranba for authentic Japanese ramen. As for cocktails at sunset, the Salthouse and LiLos are the places to be.

It is now with great confidence that I can say my hometown and surrounding environs are now more sophisticated than ever.

Either that, or I am. 🍷

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THERE ARE  
STALLS WITH  
TOWERING  
OFFERINGS OF  
PINEAPPLES, TOMATOES,  
AVOCADOES AND  
MANGOES



To market, to market for fresh produce

## FOODIE TRAIL

Carla Grosetti shares a few favourite places to drink, eat and be merry in the Far North:

### CAFÉS

- **Bang Espresso**, Shop 8, The Bolands Centre, 14 Spence St, tel: +61 (0)7 4051 7770, [www.bangespresso.com.au](http://www.bangespresso.com.au)
- **Caffiend**, Shop 5/78 Grafton St, Cairns, tel: +61 (0)7 4051 5522, [www.taste-y.com/caffiend](http://www.taste-y.com/caffiend)
- **Re: hab**, Shop 3-4, 18 Macrossan St, Port Douglas, +61 (0)7 4099 4677

### POSH NOSH

- **Hanuman**, 34 Esplanade, tel: +61 (0)7 4052 6786, [www.hanuman.com.au](http://www.hanuman.com.au)
- **Harrison's Restaurant**, 22 Wharf St, Port Douglas, tel: +61 (0)7 4099 4011 [www.harrisonsrestaurant.com.au](http://www.harrisonsrestaurant.com.au)
- **Wink Restaurant**, Cnr Spence St & Grafton St, tel: +61 (0)7 4051 9008 [www.winkrestaurant.com.au](http://www.winkrestaurant.com.au)
- **Nu-Nus**, 123 Williams Esplanade, Palm Cove, tel: +61 (0)7 4059 1880, [www.nunu.com.au](http://www.nunu.com.au)

### FINE RUSTIC FARE

- **Bellocale**, 62C Shields Street, Cairns tel: +61 (0)7 4051 7777
- **Ganbaranba Noodle Colosseum**, 12 Spence St, Cairns, tel: +61 (0)7 4031 2522
- **Ochre Restaurant**, 43 Shields St, Cairns, tel: +61 (0)7 4051 0100, [www.ochrerestaurant.com.au](http://www.ochrerestaurant.com.au)
- **Rising Sun**, 95 Williams Esplanade, Palm Cove, tel: +61 (0)7 4059 0889
- **Splash Seafood Restaurant**, 103 The Esplanade, tel: +61 (0)7 4031 9300, [www.splashrestaurant.com.au](http://www.splashrestaurant.com.au)

### PROVIDORES

- **Dino's Europa Deli**, 141 Byrnes St, Mareeba, tel: +61 (0)7 4092 3845.
- **Fusion Organics**, Cnr Grafton & Aplin St, tel: +61 (0)7 4092 3845, [www.fusionorganics.com.au](http://www.fusionorganics.com.au)
- **Vanella Cheese Factory**, 18 Hollingsworth St, Bungalow, tel: +61 (0)7 4035 1766, [www.vannellacheesefactory.com](http://www.vannellacheesefactory.com)
- **Food Trail Tours**, tel: +61 (0)7 4032 0322, [www.foodtrailtours.com.au](http://www.foodtrailtours.com.au)
- **Skybury Coffee Plantation**, 105 Ivicovic Rd, Paddys Green, tel: +61 (0)7 4093 2194 [www.skybury.com.au](http://www.skybury.com.au)

### DRINKS

- **Salthouse Bar & Restaurant**, Pier Point Rd, Cairns, tel: +61 (0)7 4041 7733, [www.salthouse.com.au](http://www.salthouse.com.au)
- **Lilo Wet Bar**, Cnr Spence & Grafton St, Cairns, tel: +61 (0)7 4046 0300, [www.rydges.com](http://www.rydges.com)