

The Stag starts new chapter in Sessions



Kirstyn and Ryan Sessions have made a stunning return to hospitality in Port Fairy by taking over The Stag restaurant and winning one hat status within six months.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]T[/dropcap>he headline for [a Trip Advisor review](#) about The Stag restaurant in Port Fairy says it all: **Ryan Sessions** is back!

For chef **Ryan** and partner **Kirstyn**, the decision to take over The Stag (1847) in March this year meant a return to the town where it all began, and where they enjoyed their greatest success.

The pair was widely known for their transformation of the

Merrijig Inn, Port Fairy, which they took over in 2006 and raised to a level that saw the restaurant awarded one hat in its first year and two in its second. It was also named the best restaurant in country Victoria.

It was an extraordinary achievement for a young couple who grew up and trained in south-west Victoria, with Kirstyn having been born in Koroit and Ryan moving to Warrnambool from New Zealand as a child.

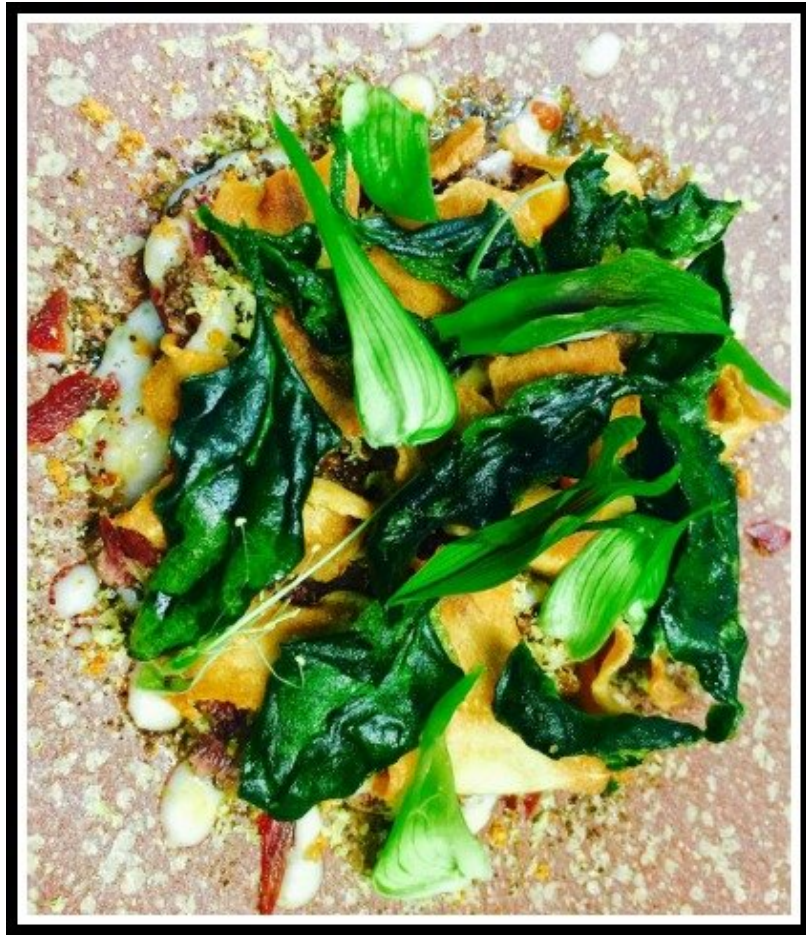
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The pair met when Ryan started working as a young chef at Clovelly Restaurant, in Warrnambool, having finished his apprenticeship with the now-defunct Mahogany Ship Restaurant at Flagstaff Hill.

“It was really there (at Clovelly), that we started to really understand and appreciate food and wine and how they could work together,” Ryan explains.

Prior to that, he confesses, he wasn’t particularly passionate about cooking.

“At school, I was much better in the arts subjects, but I wanted a job where I could go surfing in the morning,” Ryan recalls with a laugh.



From The Stag tasting menu: kangaroo, bunya nut, warrigal greens and cured egg yolk. Image: The Stag @ Instagram: the_stag_port_fairy

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]R[/dropcap]yan's flair with food saw him picked up by the celebrated Portofino's in Port Fairy, at that time run by **Andrew** and **Shane Clancey** and considered the top restaurant in the area.

But it was only a matter of time, of course, until the Sessions wanted to run a restaurant of their own – and the Merrijig Inn beckoned.

"It was fabulous, but it was also exhausting," says Kirstyn. "Seven days a week, working at that level, it takes its toll."

In 2011, the pair [offered the business](#) to top chef **Tanya**

Connellan and partner **Liz Foreman** who, wait for it, had previously run The Stag.

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“The idea was for us to get out of hospitality altogether, because we felt it had all got too much,” Ryan says.

The hospitality industry, however, had other ideas.

After starting “a 12-month break” that was to last only eight months, Ryan was offered head chef with the exclusive The Argus Dining Room, at Hepburn Springs.

Unfortunately things didn’t quite go to plan and he resigned after just four months in what he says was an “amicable” departure.



Kirstyn and Ryan Sessions in the garden at the rear of The Stag restaurant, where they are serving bush food flavours paired with local produce in a winning combination.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]T[/dropcap]he Sessions returned to the south-west and, as Kirstyn explains, did a “whole lot of different things” including her working for Oscar’s Waterfront Boutique hotel in Port Fairy and Ryan helping out in the kitchen at various pubs.

“Did the patrons have any idea who was cooking their schnitzel?” I ask.

“No,” he laughs.

Patrons of The Stag, however, certainly know who is in charge and word has spread rapidly about the dynamic, bush-food based menu and all-Australian wine list.

Indeed, despite being open for only six months, the revamped restaurant was last month [awarded one hat by The Age Good Food Guide](#).

And here Kirstyn tells me something I didn’t know: hats are awarded not just for the food, but “for the whole experience from the minute you walk in the door to the moment you leave”.

This means food, wine list, ambience, front-of-house (Kirstyn’s domain) and even the quality of glassware and cutlery.



Food as art. Bush foods are key to Ryan Session's menu, including these delightful warrigal greens. Image: The Stag @ Instagram: the_stag_port_fairy

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]I[/dropcap]t is The Stag menu, however, that has gastronomes gasping.

Ryan sources all of his ingredients from within Australia and as close to home as possible, which includes foraging along the Port Fairy coast and using small-quantity producers such as [Shaw River Buffalo Cheese](#) (Yambuk), South Seas Abalone (Portland) and Great Ocean Ducks (Port Campbell).

"We also have a strong emphasis on using indigenous ingredients – plants, fruits and berries – and taking food back to what it was," Ryan says.

And with that Kirstyn offers me a sample of ice plant – it is succulent and salty, and grown at Kingston, South Australia. While I will [leave a full food review](#) to those far more experienced than me, this one taste is enough to make me want to try the whole menu.

“Australia has a definite cuisine, but we are still discovering it,” Ryan says.

“There are 20,000 edible plants, for example, so we are really just touching the tip of the iceberg.”



The historic Stag restaurant, part of Seacombe House, Port Fairy, which dates back to 1847. Image: Wikicommons.

[box]The Stag, 22 Sackville St, Port Fairy, is open for dinner only Tuesday- Saturday. Bookings: (03) 55 68 3229[/box]



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