



> Peta Thorniley (left) and employee Katie Harley behind the counter. "I'm really lucky I found Katie, she's been great, she's a rock in here," Ms Thorniley said.

New life for *country roadhouse*

By **PERRI POLSON**

BEFORE the Great Northern Highway was diverted, it used to run right through the town of Miling.

The Miling Roadhouse was a popular rest stop for truckies, thundering down the road and rattling the windows on their way in.

But in June last year, the business ground to a halt.

It was previously operated by one person who scaled it back, making it more manageable after the bypass reduced business.

Ultimately the rundown building became unviable and it closed.

Mixed farmers Peta Thorniley and Tony White have watched the roadhouse sit in a state of unrealised potential for years, but swore they would never take it on themselves.

"We always said the potential was amazing, but we'd never take it on because it was too much hard work with all the hours you'd have to be there," Ms Thorniley said.

"And then we had kids and we weren't ever going to think about it."

When the closure was announced,

Ms Thorniley felt as though she and the town couldn't afford to let the roadhouse go under.

"We couldn't find a buyer, no one was interested," Ms Thorniley said.

"If it shut, it'll be harder to sell, harder to get the business back.

"We thought about all those ideas that we've had for so long and said 'let's just get in and do it'."

Ms Thorniley approached the Miling Co-op with an emergency rescue plan, putting her hand up to make the road-

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Welcome to this month's edition of *Ripe*

It's hard to believe this is already the second edition of the *Ripe* magazine for 2024



What is not hard to believe are the great things happening in regional Western Australia, which makes it easy for our journalists to tell great stories.

It is no surprise that a lot of country towns are doing it tough.

Declining populations, challenging economic conditions, unpredictable weather patterns, market fluctuations, along with dealing with the fallout from a myriad of political decisions don't help.

So when people living in these small communities take matters into their own hands to make the best of local circumstances, it is worth taking note.



A classic example is the story that starts on this page about how members of the tight-knit Miling community have resurrected the local roadhouse, which as you will read, is more like a local hub.

It's that can-do attitude, that in my experience, doesn't exist in the metropolitan area.

Well done to everyone involved.



This story sets the tone for the other feature stories, reflecting on people in the regions who are doing great things, sometimes a little bit different, but are worth putting the spotlight on.

From talking about an ancient cereal grain that is making a comeback, to producing an old-fashioned lamb flavour, developing artisan butter and much more, it's all inside this edition.

Enjoy!

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Farm Weekly Editor



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Published by

Farm WEEKLY

Maximising your advertising reach and reading enjoyment

Next edition: March 28

Ripe is a monthly horticultural, lifestyle and small farms magazine published by WA's BIGGEST selling rural newspaper **Farm WEEKLY**

Advertising: Caroline Court 08-9365 2618 e: ripe.farmweekly@ruralpress.com





> The roadhouse is now in full scale operation, after almost closing completely. It's a major service for the town, catering to the needs of the community in many ways. Pictured are Katie Harley (left) and Peta Thorniley with sons Xavier (left) and Mitchell.



> Peta Thorniley and her two sons, Xavier (left) aged 11, and Mitchell, 9. The roadhouse is a welcoming, calm environment with comfortable chairs, hot coffee and a television. Ms Thorniley said as the boys spend a lot of time at the roadhouse, she wanted to make it a comfortable place to rest.



> The roadhouse stocks a range of groceries, as well as hot and cold takeaway food and weekly specials.

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house operational and viable enough to float on its own.

"It does need to have a certain size before it's viable, as it needs to be able to support staff," she said.

The roadhouse is now run by a full-time employee and a couple of part-time employees, Katie, Milo and Katie's mum Jewels, but with kids in the picture, the women need work flexibility.

"We don't have a big pool nearby of people to get part-timers," Ms Thorniley said.

"We could get some more full-timers, but then you've got to find accommodation out here, and there's nowhere for them to stay."

The process of fixing up the roadhouse happened quickly at first, all while being open to the public.

It's a large space, which has had a fresh coat of paint, a new layout and a revitalised feel.

The roadhouse offers hot and cold food, coffee, a supermarket, an op shop, a bottle shop, a dining area with a television, and a children's play area.

The couple's two children, 11-year-old Xavier and Mitchell, 9, are true farm kids, but naturally spend a lot of time at the roadhouse.

Ms Thorniley has worked to make the premises as welcoming as possible – a clean and comfortable place to rest.

She has loved meeting all different people who come in for a coffee and a chat.

The roadhouse uses reusable bags and secondhand furniture, and aims to minimise waste where possible, upholding a "reduce, reuse, repair, recycle" philosophy, as well as competitive fuel prices.

Going beyond the stereotypical greasy roadhouse food, the business offers fresh sandwiches, wraps and salads, and can cater to gluten free and vegetarian diets, but a good bacon and egg toastie is still a staple on the menu.

"We've changed the menu, improved the food, we do specials and home cooked meals to cater for locals on Fridays," Ms Thorniley said.

They also cater for school lunches – brown paper lunch bags are included for a touch of nostalgia.

It's the first time Ms Thorniley has ever worked in a commercial kitchen, but with a few employees on the farm along with her own family, she's used to cooking in numbers.

"It's been fun, I'm quite good on the griddle now," she said.

Due to its size, it takes a lot of stock to make the roadhouse look full.

It's one of the challenges Ms Thorniley has had to deal with in developing the supermarket side of the business.

She said the range of products available was far more limited when buying through a wholesaler, and it is much

> Right: Tony White was born in Miling, and has been farming there ever since. Ms Thorniley and Mr White sell their lamb, Manuka Lamb brand, at the roadhouse.



more expensive, even before transport costs are added on.

Ms Thorniley wanted to be priced competitively with bigger nearby towns, so locals didn't have to travel so far to get their groceries, but buying from a wholesaler made this challenging.

Instead the team regularly travels to Perth to buy stock from major supermarkets.

This means the roadhouse can provide better prices and varieties.

"Our philosophy is 'think local where possible'," Ms Thorniley said.

The roadhouse brings in fresh bread from a bakery in Moora, as well as local honey and jam – and they even manage to have some unique items.

> Ms Thorniley said she meets all kinds of people from the roadhouse, including the crew from Outback Opal Hunters TV show.

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(Moving to Miling) was challenging at first, there's a lot of extreme things out in the country you've got to get used to.



> Peta Thorniley and Tony White grow wheat, barley and lupins on about 3000 hectares and run about 2000 sheep. Ms Thorniley said her two boys were true farm kids and love being out in the sheds fixing things.

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“I’ve had some people come to me and say ‘we’ve never had gorgonzola cheese stocked at the roadhouse before’...” she said.

Given the price of lamb, it’s also been much more cost effective for Ms Thorniley and Mr White to sell their own cuts of lamb at the supermarket.

Their Manuka Lamb brand is produced close to Miling.

The couple run a mixed sheep, broad-acre cropping and contracting business, run 2000 mating ewes and crop about

3000 hectares, producing wheat, barley, lupins and hay for export.

However Ms Thorniley wasn’t always a farmer.

Fifteen years ago, she moved to Miling almost directly from London, where she was working in executive level business and marketing for the most part of her career.

“I like to turn my life upside down every 10 years or so...I think taking on the roadhouse is turning my life upside down again,” Ms Thorniley said laughing.

“(Moving to Miling) was challenging at first, there’s a lot of extreme things

out in the country you’ve got to get used to,” she said.

Now Ms Thorniley is well-equipped to handle a variety of challenges, and plenty of them come through the doors of the roadhouse, such as car trouble, navigation problems or rescuing a drone 10 metres up a tree.

“It’s kind of fun, when someone comes in with an issue, you think ‘OK, who can I find in town to help?’”

Located conveniently between Dalwallinu, Moora, New Norcia and Pithara, Miling makes a great stop, but after the highway was diverted, traffic

into the town was reduced.

The new plan is to build up the roadhouse to offer something for everyone and bring people in off the highway, especially during tourism peak times, such as wildflower season and harvest.

Ms Thorniley’s goal is to eventually sell the roadhouse to a buyer who can keep running it at full capacity.

In over seven months, Ms Thorniley, Mr White and their employees have made exceptional progress into bringing the roadhouse into functional glory, making it easier for when the next owner comes along.