

Bushland near the village of Trentham, Victoria. **FACING PAGE** Lynda Gardener and Mark Smith outside their café and store, Trentham General.

branching out

CREATIVE COUPLE LYNDA GARDENER AND MARK SMITH ARE REJUVENATING THE TRADITIONAL GENERAL STORE.

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AS LYNDA GARDENER and Mark Smith have discovered, there's a lot to love about Trentham, the charming picture-book village snuggled in the forest on the crest of the Great Divide, 95 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. Sometimes shrouded in mist or blanketed in snow and then in summer, transformed into a refreshing retreat — reminiscent of a 19th-century hill station — it's a place the couple have spent a lot of their time since opening bespoke accommodation and events property The Trentham Estate in 2015. "It's such a sweet little town that has one of everything," says Lynda, a Melbourne-based interior designer who has created a succession of beautiful spaces including The White House in Daylesford.

"We are invested in this town spiritually and emotionally," explains Mark, former marketing and events director of Melbourne's Queen Victoria Market. The couple, who met while working in the fashion industry three decades ago and have been together for eight years, now divide their time between Trentham, temporarily based in a sweet cottage called Acre of Roses, and their Melbourne warehouse home.

It's no surprise then to find that they have recently put their stamp on another of Trentham's old buildings, the 1880s former National Bank of Australasia in High Street, now revamped into Trentham General. This time though, the project to create a contemporary take on the traditional general store has been driven by Mark's long-held dream to try his hand at hospitality. That, and their shared love of the old bank building itself. "I have always loved the façade of this beautiful old bank," he says. "It's the nicest building in the street. All my life and in my career in retail and marketing, I've thought about a café, a little hole-in-the-wall café, and then coming to Trentham all those things have collided."

There was already a café in the building and, for Mark at least, it was too good to be true when they finally had the chance to take the reins. For Lynda though, a self-confessed hoarder who closed her renowned Melbourne homewares store, Empire Vintage, two years ago to concentrate on her design and accommodation businesses, warming to the idea of creating another retail space took a little longer. "The building has a warm and inviting feel, and so after >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT A painting dubbed "Farmer Bob the potato grower", perhaps a nod to the region's own potato festival, in the café; dogs have their own 'waiting station' outside; the private dining space is furnished with pieces from Lynda's collection; the library offers a quiet spot to relax; granola with poached pears is an all-day treat; an old wooden carryall holds napkins; barista Elliott Wilson at the coffee machine. **FACING PAGE** Mark runs the café side of the business. The pendant lights are from HK Living.





Lynda and Mark have combined their creative talents in Trentham General. The stoneware was collected by Lynda. **RIGHT** Horses grazing in Trentham.



I'd fainted and got up off the floor, I said: 'Let's run with this, this is such a beautiful building and I can put another store in it!'" Lynda recalls. "I knew I could pull the shop together and knew it would be beautiful."

After two solid months of the couple working night and day to reconfigure and renovate the interior, Trentham General café and store opened in late May this year. Walk inside and you'll find the fit-out is simple and inviting, a mix of earthy and contemporary, but also celebrates the age and character of the building. Lynda has created a colour palette in collaboration with natural paint company Bauwerk. And so, the walls at Trentham General feature a high painted dado of a colour she named in the building's honour, a "dirty army green" fittingly called General, and above, a clean white called Bleached White.

The two front rooms devoted to the café are filled with light, with open fireplaces and giant hanging baskets of ferns suspended from the ceiling. Old oil portraits hang in each room, picking up on the olive green tones of the paint. One is of a distinguished gent Lynda has named General Smith, the other of a rural worker she calls "Farmer Bob the potato grower", and both, she adds, resonate with the story of the place, and the vision and inspiration behind

Trentham General. "I've always loved cute little stories that bring an idea together," says Lynda.

The menu is deliberately simple, with a focus on quality — and features breakfast all day. "We have muffins and gluten-free offerings, beautiful doughnuts that are having a bit of a moment, we do a lot of teas, coffee and chai, and a beautiful drinking chocolate from Grounded Pleasures in Ballarat," says Mark. "A local guy makes crumpets and we have a chef nearby who makes the granola. We have two chefs who rotate and you can have soup here at eight o'clock in the morning, and eggs and porridge at 3pm."

Further back is Lynda's store, a beautifully curated space and an ever-changing treasure chest of old and new: special vintage artworks and pieces from her private collection, contemporary rugs, locally made preserves from Natasha Morgan and The Cottage Herbalist teas. "It's a mix of old and new, industrial and contemporary, the way I like to decorate now," she says. "People are going to get good things here, it's stock I've never wanted to part with before."

A reading nook overlooks the rear garden and holds a growing library of garden books and cookbooks to pore over, and adjacent, a room for group dining or meetings. "We had a party of 10 in there yesterday, and we have a group of men in their 70s who play bocce every Thursday and come here afterwards," says Mark, who runs the café five days a week, while Lynda is in the shop four days.

For Lynda and Mark, giving back to the town that has offered them creative opportunities was a priority. "It was really important for us to build something for Trentham to call its own and that the locals would be proud to show to visitors," says Mark. "It's for the town as much as it is for us, because we feel strongly about the town prospering and if we can play a part in that, all the better."

Trentham General is open Thursday to Monday from 7am–4pm weekdays and 8am–4pm weekends, 37a High Street, Trentham. For more information, telephone 0416 032 111 or follow @trentham.general on Instagram.