



WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY | Helen Collier

# WIGGLEY BOTTOM FARM

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## THE DELIGHTFUL WORLD OF GILLIE ST GEORGE AND HER BADGER CREEK HOME

*E*verything about Wiggley Bottom Farm is delightful – starting with the name; it conjures up a Beatrix Potter scene and doesn't disappoint. As you turn off the unsealed road in Badger Creek into Wiggley Bottom Farm's driveway, you're met by a gaggle of geese honking and waddling in front of your vehicle as they head to the dam or back to their enclosure. Many a B&B guest arriving to stay at Wiggley has rung owner Gillie St George asking what to do as they can't get past. "Just drive slowly towards them and they'll move - eventually," she explains.

Once past the geese, you wind your way up the drive, lined with weeping willows, flanked either side with horse paddocks. Velma or Flash Harry whinny their hellos as you pass by. Arriving at the house, the views are terrific. Over in the far paddock Gillie's pygmy goats are happily grazing. She introduces me to Sooty, Sweep, Cinnamon, Nutmeg and Gloria - named by her social media followers in a 'name the goat' competition. "I had been going to breed them, but it's just a matter of finding the time," Gillie says with a shrug and a grin.

I'm staggered to learn Gillie is a triple 000 responder for Ambulance Victoria, doing 10-hour shifts in East Burwood, as well as running Wiggley Bottom Farm, which has three accommodation offerings. She's up with the lark to feed and exercise the animals (did I mention she has three highly energetic dogs?) and maintains the grounds, all 15-acres of them, with help one day a month from gardener Jen Hoogland. "It keeps me busy that's for sure," Gillie says as she carries the tack back to the shed, "and I wouldn't have it any other way. It's always changing too, which keeps it interesting. The different seasons bring with them new jobs and I'm constantly learning – whether we're mending fences, chopping fire wood, planting the veggies or helping an orphaned gosling, I love the variety."

When I quiz her more about helping orphaned goslings she asks, "You may have read about him in the Herald Sun?" And proceeds to tell me a delightful tale of a day-old gosling she found last year, cold and alone on the floor of the goose house, ostracised by the flock. She scooped him up and took him to work with her, knowing he wouldn't survive if left there, and everyone at work adored him. The following day she handed the gosling (who by now had been named Ryan) over to a friend, whose 8-year old nephew Finn had always wanted a bird. It was agreed that Finn and his sister Mia would temporarily foster Ryan until he was strong enough to be reintroduced to the flock. On the day of the reintroduction, Ryan enjoyed a swim on the dam and then went straight back to the car and climbed in with his human family – he didn't identify with the geese in the slightest. He loves Finn and Mia so much he is now a permanent member of their family and is quite the local celebrity – he goes swimming and surfing at the beach, and walks them to school each morning. He is on a lead, alongside the family dog, and gets mobbed by enthusiastic school mates as he's so cuddly. He was written up in the Herald Sun and was even on Kiss FM.

Gillie's accent betrays her and I ask how long ago she left England. "Oohh you're going back now – must be coming up for 35 years ago," she says, eyebrows raised in surprise. "As soon as I came to Healesville it reminded me so much of my upbringing in the Lake District I knew I'd eventually make my home here." After three years

circumnavigating Australia in her early twenties she went on to fly with Qantas for 15 years as an air chef in First Class (trained by none other than Neil Perry), met her husband (now ex) who managed and lived on Hamilton Island in the 90's and, after 15 years at various resorts around the country, they finally moved to the Yarra Valley 17 years ago. "When we designed and built our house here we had no intention of running it as a business, but it totally lends itself to being a wonderful farm stay experience. People can stay in the apartment," she says gesturing to a wing off the main house with its own west-facing deck and garden, "Or the cottage," she indicates to a beautiful cream weatherboard cottage, "Or even the tiny house."

Right on cue, we turn and see the smartest, cutest tiny house, painted navy blue with white trim with a little table and chairs, and Baby Q on the deck. "A friend of mine built it and I designed the interior and we put the finishing touches to it in lockdown; it was one of many projects and it's proving rather popular!" We poke our heads inside and I'm immediately in love with the feeling of space, the attention to detail, the loft bedroom and the fabulous décor. I wonder out loud how she juggles bookings for three sets of accommodation, on top of such a demanding day job at triple zero while keeping on top of all the maintenance AND stays sane - and Gillie's eyes twinkle as she laughs, asking, "Who said anything about me being sane?"





The mental and emotional demands on a triple zero call taker are not for the faint-hearted and there are certificates of recognition lining the wall in her study. I lean in closer to read one: The patient, who was gored by a wild bull, would like to thank the call taker who was highly efficient, calm and competent. Coming home to her animals is Gillie's way of de-stressing after a tough day. Dogs in particular, it's been proven, bring our heart rates down when we stroke them and Gillie's crazy three are clearly well loved. She tells me how children who don't have a pet of their own, love to come and stay and 'borrow' her dogs for a few days. Teddy B Bear in particular will take hugs, treats and love wherever he can find it. She always tries to involve the children who come to stay, by taking them to feed the animals in the morning, work permitting. Families come year after year to stay here and spend time in nature and many have become Gillie's friends. "I love it when you click with a guest and you see that they 'get Wiggley' - they look visibly different by the time they leave. How fabulous that a few days here can help them recharge and let go and properly relax. I try really hard to make sure their stay is as perfect as it can be. I light the fire so the cottage is warm for them when they arrive or I'll help them with restaurant suggestions for a special occasion or book them in somewhere as a surprise for their other half. It doesn't take much to go that extra mile and people really appreciate it."

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Many guests bring their own dog with them as all Wiggley’s accommodations are pet-friendly. “Dogs are very much part of the family these days and people want to bring them on holiday, which I totally understand. And the Yarra Valley prides itself on being dog-friendly too.” Gillie works closely with local wine tour company Pooches & Pinot who take her guests out on a private wine tour with their dog. She’s even put packages together for guests who simply want someone else to do all the organizing.

As she walks me through the gorgeous accommodation offerings it’s immediately obvious that interior decorating is one of her passions; “I admit it, I spend hours gazing at property porn and interiors magazines for inspiration and great ideas.” When she’s not flicking through her magazines you’ll find her on her thoroughbred Velma, having a riding lesson or trail riding to Badger Creek Blueberry Farm with friends, for a glass of bubbles and a plate of Ali’s infamous sausage rolls. “My father was a Master of the Hunt and my earliest memories are of sitting on my pony, feeding the lambs on our farm and always being surrounded by farm dogs. So I guess you could say I’ve come full circle. And honestly, I couldn’t be happier.” ■