

WELL GROUNDED

A Waikato couple completely *rebuilt* their *country cottage* and are now revelling in their *grow-your-own* lifestyle

WORDS DENISE IRVINE / PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER

THESE PAGES The kitchen and dining area is at the heart of Lauren and Matt Wells' rebuilt Waikato cottage; the old French school table was bought from Vitrine - Lauren says she wanted a table that would be perfect for big Christmas gatherings; the walls are painted in Resene 'Bianca'.



LAUREN AND MATT WELLS' house is in the lee of a finely contoured hill that rears skyward like a giant green sculpture. It dominates the view from their living room; the sun rises above it in the mornings and at twilight there are shadowy dairy cows silhouetted on the ridge.

The hill belongs to the Wells' neighbour, but it was central to the purchase of their country property at Tauwhare, near Hamilton. "It sold us," says Lauren, "we love watching it."

They moved into the circa 1914 wooden cottage on two acres of land six years ago with sons Liam, then aged four, and baby Noah. The location was well placed for Lauren's job at a local dairy company, and for Matt's at a vet-only pharmaceutical company in Hamilton. There was a rural school on their front doorstep, and a good friend of Lauren's lived nearby.

But they could also see the potential to make the most of country life – growing their own vegetables, running free-range chooks and keeping a few animals to provide beef and lamb for the table. >



THIS PAGE Pulling up the carpets to find beautiful floorboards was one of the high points of the rebuild; local interior designer Harriet Di Maio helped source much of the home's furniture including the dining table, the French bench under the picture wall and the 90-year-old Persian rug.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Matt and Lauren Wells in their new kitchen; they both love to cook and enjoy being inspired by whatever's thriving in the garden. Lauren relaxes in a sunny corner on a comfy chair they've had for years – once red, it's now faded to pink. Builder Jay Cowley crafted the bookcases that surround the office door.



THIS PAGE The master bedroom is in the extension at the rear of the house; it's a tranquil, light-filled room with panelling in Resene 'Duck Egg Blue'; the chandelier was bought from Antiques on Victoria in Cambridge.

OPPOSITE The well-proportioned hallway was one of the things Matt and Lauren loved about the house; the hall walls are bright with Pacific-themed artwork - some pieces from Rarotonga, which Matt's family has links to, and some from Lauren's homeland of Hawaii; Lauren and Harriet Di Maio chose the mix of light fittings from a Tirau antiques shop and Mr Ralph in Paeroa. >



“WE CHOSE TO KEEP THE THINGS THAT WOULD GIVE US MEMORIES OF THE OLD HOUSE”

THIS PAGE The bathroom window looks out on a tree that’s covered in apple blossom in spring; the bath is new, but the outside was painted in Farrow & Ball ‘Down Pipe’.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) The window seat in the master bedroom replicates one from the original cottage. Noah pays a visit to Liam’s bedroom; the best thing about country living for kids is that there’s always something to do outside, but that doesn’t stop the boys wanting to play on electronic devices, notes Lauren. After sharing one bathroom for years, the couple was keen to have a roomy family bathroom, with plenty of space for two boys; the vintage wall light is French. Harriet’s husband Giovanni Di Maio made the bulletin board in the office, which is set up so that Lauren and Matt can work from home at times, and the boys can leave projects spread out.



It sounded idyllic and so it turned out to be, but first the cottage presented a few issues that needed addressing. It had been relocated to Tauwhare in 1997 and wasn’t in great shape.

Winters were tough. The curtains billowed as wind blew in through countless gaps, there was a flooding crisis in the roof and the indoor plants froze. “It was brutally cold,” says Matt.

The cottage was too far gone for restoration, and many people would have bowled it and started afresh. Lauren and Matt chose another tack. They took the place apart and meticulously rebuilt it – with new materials – on the old foundations.

It was a much more ambitious project than they anticipated. “So many times, we nearly called it off,” says Lauren. “But I’m glad we stuck with it.”

They extended front and back, but kept the 3.3m stud height, the matai and rimu floorboards and the panelled wooden doors in the hallway. “We chose to keep the things that would give us memories of the old house,” says Matt. “We had to stay a bit faithful to the poor old girl.”

Lauren, Matt, Liam and Noah have been happily in their “new” place for 15 months. It’s gracious and spacious; it retains the character of the cottage, has all the benefits of a modern building, and is toasty warm in winter.

Cooking is a passion for Lauren and Matt, and they are relishing their splendid new kitchen with its commodious walk-in pantry, black Falcon double oven and bespoke Oregon pine island unit made by Hamilton craftsman Scott Woolston. >



THIS PAGE Matt and Noah making pizzas on the Warmington fire – every Sunday is family pizza night; a local engineering company made the fire surround, pressing copper sheets into stones to create a textured look.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top) This large space acts as a laundry, mud room and produce storage area. Making cider is a lengthy process involving a day of picking and a big working bee with friends to wash, pulp and spin the apples to extract the juice – it’s ready in about three or four months. The wooden vegetable storage racks, made by Scott Woolston, can be pulled out so garlic and onions can be dried in the sun.



The island is topped with a massive polished-concrete bench. “We wanted a big work space,” says Lauren. “When Matt cooks, he spreads out.” The bench is so heavy that it took 14 men to lift it into place, with its owners praying that it would fit and it wouldn’t crack.

There is a handily placed outdoor fireplace and pizza oven for more culinary treats, which the children and their friends enjoy. An intriguing multi-purpose room behind the kitchen acts as a laundry, mud room and storage area for the vegetables that Matt and Lauren grow in their extensive potager gardens laid to a plan by landscape designer Xanthe White.

The mud room has storage for outdoor paraphernalia, vintage concrete tubs for scrubbing the crops, and wooden racks (more of Scott Woolston’s work) for drying and storing them.

Lauren and Matt enjoy many different cuisines and grow some harder-to-source vegetables and herbs such as celeriac, broad beans, artichokes, chervil and Vietnamese mint, basing meals around what’s abundant and in season.

One autumn they had an enormous crop of eggplants, capsicums and chillies. “We made some pretty crazy chilli sauces, and probably every eggplant recipe known to mankind,” says Matt. “And when else would you ever make capsicum soup out of 12 roasted capsicums?”

Not everything goes to plan: a memorable disaster was finding one of their steers sitting contentedly in a patch of bare earth that had been lush with corn and broccoli.

“It was quite tempting to have corn-fed steak for dinner that evening,” says Matt. >



THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) Noah, six, Matt, Lauren and Liam, 10, who is holding his pet lamb Willow; behind them is the view of the hill, which drew them to the property. With a variety of hens - two leghorns, an Australorp, a laced Wyandotte, a speckled Sussex and two brown shavers - the Wells end up with all different shapes, sizes and colours of eggs; some are better for poaching, some for boiling, some for baking. The verandah, which catches the afternoon sun, is one of the original features the couple was keen to preserve.

OPPOSITE The cottage is painted in Resene 'Half Tapa' with 'Half Bianca' trim and the roof is Resene 'Grey Friars'.



The couple also grow berries, and there are plans to plant more - everything from blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and blackberries to gooseberries and Chilean guavas. Abundant fruit trees include pears, plums, quince, figs, loquat, feijoas, citrus, and four varieties of apples. The apples tap neatly into another hobby, making apple cider with a few other couples at a friend's cidery. The families pool their crops, there is a day of picking and a big collaborative effort to process the apples.

Matt and Lauren say the resulting cider tastes amazing. It's very dry and refreshing, and much less sweet than most commercial varieties.

They generally spend two or three hours a week in the garden. "It's actually less time-consuming than you'd think," says Matt, who's happy that the kids sometimes like to help out, sneaking peas and cherry tomatoes straight from the garden.

Lauren and Matt both travel regularly for their jobs and at journey's end they look forward to returning to their mellow homestead in the lee of the green hill. "You walk in and feel really happy to be here," says Lauren. □

Q&A

WE COULDN'T HAVE DONE THE REBUILD WITHOUT: Our local team - Aaron Guerin of LAD Architecture, builders Jay Cowley and Chris Dobson, and interior designer Harriet Di Maio.

RENOVATION LOW POINT: When we found out that the garage, which was the only part of the house to still have walls and a roof, also needed to be dismantled and rebuilt.

BEST MONEY WE EVER SPENT: Central heating in the house - bliss after years of living with cold draughts.

OUR VEGE GARDENING WAS INSPIRED BY: Our grandfathers. Lauren's grandfather grew all the family food and had jars of preserves everywhere (we still make his dill pickle) and Matt's grandfather had an enormous garden that seemed to feed half the neighbourhood.

A WELL-KEPT SECRET ABOUT THIS AREA: The wonderful produce and atmosphere at the Cambridge Farmers' Market.

Lauren and Matt Wells



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