

# FEAST *of the* SENSES



22—27 March 2018 Innisfail, Tropical Nth Queensland

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## Regional festivals and the pursuit of relevance

If you live in a city, the chances are you are spoiled for choice every weekend between markets, festivals and food events and you are definitely spoiled for choice when it comes to the range of food and cultural temptations available in contemporary urban Australia.

And, judging from the consistent turnout at these events, the pursuit of food and market experiences is a major weekend attraction for many Australians, not to mention a significant economy in its own right.

Some regional towns and centres have managed to turn local events into national drawcards, with all the associated boost to local economies from tourism and jobs for services and trades. Tamworth, Parkes, Mildura and Warracknabeal are great regional town success stories. Their place on the national festival/food event stage wasn't a miracle however, it took hard work, community dedication, innovation and patience to get to where they are today.

At the other end of the scales, if you live in a region like the Cassowary Coast in far north Queensland, about an hour's drive south of Cairns with an aging population of 30,000 people spread across 4,700sq km, then your weekend experiences are more likely to evolve around camping which is popular with many residents or otherwise catching occasional race and sporting events, sporadic mobile markets, the annual Show and if you are lucky an annual festival event each year.

Over the past 16 years, and after a run of bad luck with three devastating tropical cyclones named Winifred (1986), Larry (2006) and Yasi (2011) tearing the heart and spirit out of the region, the small picturesque art deco town of Innisfail, which is the main commercial centre for the Cassowary Coast, has been home to a unique annual community driven food festival named Feast of the Senses.

Last year named in the top 10 food festivals in Queensland, the Feast of the Senses has proven to be a stayer, reinventing itself year after year, and is now definitely the queen of festivals for the rare and exotic fruits of the Tropical North.

“The focus for our festival has always been food, specifically the region's diverse range of rare and exotic fruits”, says festival manager, Kirsty Densmore, who is currently romping in her 8th year at the event's helm. “I am constantly amazed at the way our community spirit comes together year after year to make our event happen.”

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“Every year, staging a festival event in a small region like the Cassowary Coast, in the middle of Katter Heartland, is a huge effort”, says Kirsty. “Last year we pulled off a massive feat of successfully attempting a Guinness Book of Records longest banana split ever (8,040 metres – that’s 8 kms). This year our theme is completely different focusing on ‘Australian Culture, Ancient and Modern – Closing the Cultural Gap’ by providing a cultural experience with an appropriate range of food and entertainment.

“This year we are lucky to have Australian Bananas and MSF Sugar as major sponsors but it still requires an army of sponsors and supporters to pull off the different activities needed for the festival to be big enough to consider itself relevant.”

Kirsty is looking forward to the next and inevitable phase for any regional festival, which is to become ... well, like Parkes, Tamworth and Woodford...

“We have been incredibly lucky to secure state government funding to help the festival with a strategic plan for the next five years”, said Kirsty. “We’ve been privileged to have Krista Hauritz, an outstanding proponent of sustainable event tourism, appointed as our mentor for this project and we are very excited to welcome Krista to the 2018 festival to meet people and see how we’ve been running things till now.”

“For a festival like ours, we can either continue as we are, but of course people’s tastes change and the pressure is always on to be different, to be unique”, Kirsty says, adding that finding younger people is getting harder with the big challenge to becoming a stand out festival. Sustainable in its current format, we hope to move to a high level with a permanent office and several full-time staff.

For the 2018, organisers appear to be happy to just throw yet another great party and celebrate the region’s abundance of local produce and its never-ending lush tropical beauty.

But for Kirsty and the festival committee, next year is going to mark the beginning of a new world, as this well-oiled event with its establish street cred embarks on the journey into big event world and the pursuit of relevance.

“If regional towns stay still in our modern world with all its technology and constant drift to cities and better jobs, they decay and close up shop”, Kirsty sums her town up. “Innisfail is too beautiful and full of secret treasures, not least the recent influx of southern refugees, for us to let that happen. We aren’t just about keeping our festival kicking along, our whole town needs to continue its heart beating.”

“We are lucky that outside forces understand this and look forward to the work ahead.”