

TOURISM TRAILBLAZERS

# WATERVALE HOTEL



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### About the Watervale Hotel

Nicola Palmer and Warrick Duthy purchased the Watervale Hotel in the Clare Valley four years ago; their goal, to be a tourism beacon for the region. After constant renovations for two years, the new hotel was set to open in March 2020 but was immediately closed due to the pandemic. Two years on and the hotel is a thriving food and beverage destination offering la carte dining, a degustation menu, cooking masterclasses, farm tours and wine tastings. With a farm to plate and sustainability philosophy, almost all the produce used at the Watervale Hotel is supplied by their other venture, Penobscot Farm, attracting visitors from all over to discover their award-winning experiences.

### Challenges faced

- Opening a business during the pandemic limited the number of people walking through the doors due to consumer hesitancy and limited awareness of the new offering.
- Attracting skilled hospitality staff to a regional area.
- Set to open just as the pandemic hit, Nicola made the tough decision to close the hotel for six months, taking the time to continue renovations, develop exceptional experiences, and rebuild the website, ready to open again in September 2020.

### Overcoming adversity

- **Developed unique experiences.** The COVID lockdown of 2020 provided Nicola and Warrick with the opportunity to curate premium experiences that incorporated COVID restrictions such as density limits and social distancing from the start. They focused on full farm to plate experiences with farm tours and bespoke cooking masterclasses, appealing to consumers in the COVID normal environment.
- **Set the bar high.** In shaping their offering, Nicola and Warrick visited and learnt from the best of the best around the country such as Alla Wolf-Tasker (co-owner of the Lake House in Daylesford, Victoria) to see what would work at the Watervale Hotel.
- **Changed recruitment style.** Trained apprentices and employed international workers on student visas or pathway to permanent residency. Offering a range of skills for workers to learn meant they attracted highly skilled chefs who wanted the farm work as part of their visa application process.
- **Word of mouth.** To harness this important marketing tool, Nicola and Warrick entered awards programs, encouraged visitors to tell their friends and got involved in industry initiatives to boost awareness such as the Great State Voucher program.

### Lessons learnt

- **Always put the brand first.** Grow slowly and authentically to build a reputation and educate potential and returning visitors about what your business is and what you believe in.
- **Seek excellence and recognition.** Enter awards as a way of promoting new business and offerings. Winning 11 awards in 18 months boosted reputation and awareness of the business.
- **Champion the region.** Work with and promote local businesses to entice visitors to linger longer in the region and provide a distinctive story to guests. The Watervale Hotel aims to showcase the whole region through a 'cellars without doors' program.



*Tourism is something you need to put your whole heart into. It's about being hospitable and doing whatever you can to look after your space and customers, showing visitors your world.*

Nicola Palmer, Watervale Hotel

### The Watervale Hotel approach

- **Stick to what you believe in.** If you change your philosophy with every problem, you will not stay on the path you wanted to. Believe in yourself and everything you do with your end goal in mind.
- **Know your market.** Don't just look at the market as it is now but what you want it to be and diversify to encourage visitors to stay longer.
- **Look to your region.** Tourism is a huge part of the economy, especially for the Clare Valley, so working together is important to drive visitors and boost expenditure in the region.
- **Be brave and take a chance.** Launching a new business during a pandemic was not easy, but by thinking about what people want such as quality experiences, getting back to nature, and sustainability, Nicola and Warrick created something special that people will travel to experience.

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