

# Movement at the station

*Toolamba's Junction Hotel serves up the publican's home-grown lamb, and a fair dose of community spirit.*

STORY + PHOTOS TERRI COWLEY

There hasn't been a passenger train stop at the Victorian hamlet of Toolamba since 1981. However, the pub that grew up to service the railway station, the Junction Hotel, is still very much the beating heart of the quiet, rural village, 170 kilometres north of Melbourne.

Sheep farmer Rowan Block became its 27th publican when he bought it in October 2014. "One of the rationales to buying this place was to get retail value for our lamb," Rowan says. "The pub has to fit in with the commercial operation. We're not changing the farm to suit the pub. The pub is an extension of the farm." There is a wry grin when he describes being a farmer and publican: "It's two of the toughest games: small farming and country pubs."

The Junction Hotel, first built in 1881 and then rebuilt after it burnt down in 1912, looks very much like your typical country pub. A verandah fronts the main street under a wide tin roof. There's an open fire in the bar, an outdoor area and a dining room. The walls are adorned with historical pictures, including the triumphs of local sporting teams.

However, the direct paddock-to-plate experience that Rowan has been able to add, gives the place much more of a reason for being. His Primeline Maternal ewes (made up of five different breeds) graze on two properties, one on the Goulburn River just a few clicks down the road. He is currently trialling lambs produced from Tradie rams (Southdown-Dorset cross) over selected ewe lambs to produce meat with high levels of marbling – the sheep equivalent to Wagyu beef. Rowan normally runs 1500 ewes and produces up to 2000 lambs annually. "It is about authenticity and sustainability," he says. "You can see the sheep in their natural environment and wave to Mum as you go past, on your way to the pub," Rowan jokes.

Rowan is a fifth-generation farmer from the Wimmera in Victoria's far west. In the mid-1980s, he and his young family moved to Adelaide, where he got an accounting degree and worked in an office for a decade. "I really missed the space and agriculture," Rowan says. In 1996 he got a job as financial controller at Mitchelton Winery at Nagambie, Vic, and also took the opportunity to get back on the land when a 160-hectare farm came up for sale at Toolamba, about 40 kilometres north. "It was a big hobby farm and it was just what I needed," Rowan says. In 2004 he returned

to farming fulltime when he and his school teacher wife Deb bought another 140ha across the river. He says being a farmer as "a disease" that you can never shake.

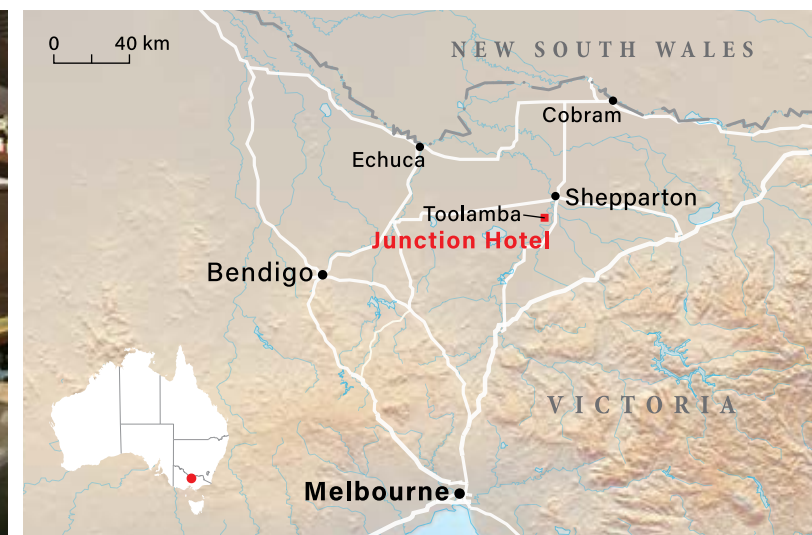
The pub has a full-time chef and about six casual staff. On a big night, the pub will serve up to 80 meals. On Wednesday, it is Pot & Parmi Night followed by Lamb Night on Thursday. A full menu is offered for lunch and dinner on Friday and Saturdays and on Sundays for lunch only. On Sunday nights, a takeaway service is available. Specialties include lamb racks and shanks, Roast TooLAMBa, lamb korma, braised lamb shoulder chops and lamb mince bolognese. There's also chicken tenderloins, prawn salad, chicken schnitzel, penne carbonara and a good kids' menu as well as one of the better, reasonably priced wine lists of a country pub, courtesy of Rowan's experience in the wine industry. "While our future will continue to revolve around food, it's not about fine dining," Rowan says. "There will continue to be a place for everybody here."

Toolamba local Pam Pogue loves to meet her family at the Junction for a meal. "All their lamb dishes are delicious," Pam says. "The paddock-to-plate aspect is special. If it wasn't for the pub, there would be nowhere here that people could go and just casually meet."

Local Jim Noonan, says it's important to support local business in a town the size of Toolamba, where the only other shopfront business is a general store. "It has been a real meeting place for the tradesmen," Jim says. "It was called the office; there were more deals done there than anywhere."

Rowan wants to extend the pub with a 120-seat function room, new kitchen, new toilets, and a lawn area for families and musicians. "Toolamba is a can-do, progressive little place," Rowan says. "Ultimately, what I want is for the hotel to be the base of it; the hub. Sporting clubs and pubs are just so important to the fabric of small towns."

While passengers no longer alight at Toolamba, countless freight trains thunder through daily and the junction is still there just beyond the pub, where the north-west line splits off to Echuca. The old station clock keeps time, hanging above the pub's fireplace. Some locals have a plan to attract visitors by bringing back some of the original station buildings that have been reused elsewhere. If they can pull it off, they're assured a lamb chop at the Junction Hotel.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Junction Hotel; publican Rowan Block on his sheep farm; Toolamba railway station, circa 1920; locals (l-r) Jim Noonan, Terry McHugh, Justin van den Born and Shane 'Boss' Oliver pop in for an afternoon drink.