



## Gourmet, to Go

Sally Clifton's mission is to serve good food, whether it's from her food store in Tamworth, in north-western NSW, or on the road with her catering business.

WORDS BY MEGAN TROUSDALE. PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM McADAM

**The limewashed timber-slatted** façade and saffron-coloured interior of Pronto Catering and Food Store clearly express the vibrancy and creativity of its proprietor Sally Clifton. While the striking design turns heads at Tamworth in north-western New South Wales, Sally is quick to point out that "Pronto is all about the food".

With a background in economics law and teaching, Sally started "dabbling in catering" to create a job for herself when she married John Clifton and moved to Coolah in the state's central west — "a hundred kilometres from the nearest supermarket". Her first catering job was for a school centenary dinner for 220 people.

"I thought I would either like it or hate it after that," she says.

She trained as a chef through an accelerated TAFE program "for cooks who could cook, but had no qualifications".

"I was pregnant at the time and used to leave home at a chilly 5am to make the 170-kilometre journey to Tamworth in my bomb of an old car," she says.

After a long 10-year 'apprenticeship' at Coolah, the couple and their children Nicholas and Alice, now 10 and 4, moved to Tamworth to build the catering business. Tempted by a generous space that was close to the hub of a regional city, they transformed what had been a muffler shop into a commercial kitchen, shopfront and art gallery with the help of local artist Marlon Dalton and Hoodoo Design.

"The council health inspector was ashen-faced and couldn't speak," says Sally, remembering their initial inquiries about using the location. Until Pronto moved in, it was primarily the domain of takeaway food outlets, automotive workshops and retail warehouses.

Sally and John retained a sense of the industrial history of the building in the new design. A dark grey industrial vinyl covers the concrete floor and a heavy concrete retail counter and they installed a stainless steel commercial kitchen.

With head chef Simon Hartigan, store manager Emma Chaseling, and a core of professional waiters, Pronto is the contract

caterer for two of Tamworth's major venues and caters for events, particularly weddings, from the north of the Hunter Valley to the Queensland border. Being off-site has its moments.

"While people may not be able to relate to it at the moment, we have driven through floodwaters, we've pushed trailers through mud and barbecued under umbrellas," says Sally. Then there's the other extreme.

"For one wedding we drove 170 kilometres on a dirt road and when we asked if the hosts had any water we were handed two drink bottles off the tractor." On top of that, there was no electricity or light. "We were told that we could use the generator in the shed for the microwave. They hadn't thought to provide light until it was obvious we needed it and then produced an enormous spotlight that attracted millions of bugs."

Sally says a marquee wedding is the epitome of country hospitality where the bride and her family have the opportunity to offer their guests something they may never have experienced before, whether it's

a fabulous garden or a gorgeous landscape.

Good food is created from good produce and Sally enjoys the relationship she has with her suppliers, many of whom deliver their produce personally. She believes Tamworth is an unsung area in terms of produce and her menus feature many local products, from Forest Hill chickens and Paradise Fresh Produce to Aubergine Estate olive oil, Koolkuna berries from Niangala, and Peel River cream and milk.

"We are not a deli, we are a quality food store," she says. "You can buy products or a whole meal, ready to go."

Sally tells of several elderly customers who live by themselves, do not want to cook, and buy a dozen meals at a time. The bulk orders are completely understandable

when you see what's in the display cabinet. Mediterranean quiche, spicy Moroccan chicken, lemon and herb chicken, beef and artichoke salad, chocolate brownies, chocolate tart, vanilla pannacotta with strawberry syrup and lemon butter cupcakes are enough to tempt anyone.

"We have comfort foods such as the tuna bake and beef stroganoff, but we have been encouraging our customers to try something different," says Sally. Obviously the customers liked "something different" because they keep coming back for more.

*Pronto Catering and Food Store, 533 Peel Street, Tamworth. Open Monday to Friday, 10am to 6.30pm, and Saturday, 10am to 2pm. Telephone (02) 6766 2211 or visit [www.prontocatering.com.au](http://www.prontocatering.com.au)*



**Right, from top** Lemon 'startlets' are a star attraction; Emma, the store manager, on the move. **Facing page, from left** Sally shows off the very popular fig and orange fruitcake; the timber-slatted shopfront; good produce is used in all Pronto's creations.