



Rachel Ward

AN ENGLISH ROSE IN THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH, RICHARD ZACHARIAH MEETS RACHEL WARD. PHOTOGRAPHY NICKY RYAN.



A spider lands on Rachel Ward's immaculate shoulder. Noticing it, she casually flicks the black invader off her white linen dress. Many of her countrywomen would have gone pale at even the sight of a spider, but not this English rose. "That's Mum, she's at home here among the spiders and the snakes," says Rachel's 17-year-old daughter Matilda.

Home for this family (during the holiday season at least) are the rolling hills behind Macksville in Northern NSW. And while this is marginal, and often

fairly dry dairy-farming country, it's rich in soul-food for Rachel and husband Bryan Brown.

On the morning H&H visited Rachel, she had spent the morning leading a group of visitors on horseback around her sunbarn farm, through the towering pines that stand at attention along the drive and down into the flooded valley below the house where wild ducks nest and white herons stalk behind grazing cattle. In riding breeches, long boots and a helmet, Rachel, 47, is an assured horsewoman, confident on her fresh, independently-minded Appaloosa, while 11-year-old son

Opposite page: Rachel at home on her veranda. This page, clockwise: The outdoor dining-table has seen many a big night; Her farm is a place for Rachel to chill out with the family; Rachel and Bryan's son Joe; 11; Riding her beloved Appaloosa through the property's bushland.

Joe handles his painted pony like he was born to ride. Joe's mates, on a variety of steeds, make up the party trekking through the eucalypt bush, checking on cows and calves in steep paddocks of long grass before heading their mounts into the cooling waters of a dam.

It's all very Australian, and so far from the dark forests of Rachel's home counties in England. For the niece of the Earl of Dudley, whose genteel upbringing mirrored that of Princess Di, this unpretentious farm is her respite from the madding crowd, and the result of an 18-year love affair which began when she was filming *The Umbrella Woman* on location nearby with now-husband Bryan.

On driving through the gates of the 370-acre farm for the first time, Bryan and Rachel were entranced by the mystical bunya pines whose cones, folklore says, fed local Aborigines and now guard the ghost-visited homestead. Buying it was their pledge that Australia was to be home for these two young actors, both at the height of their careers, the world at their feet.

They had met on the set of *The Thorn Birds* in Los Angeles, the mini-series destined to draw the second largest audience in television history. It was a perfect match between the highborn English beauty and the taciturn, no-frills Aussie hero – and Australia won. "He (Bryan), offered me a better alternative," Rachel says, laughing, now out of her riding gear and in evening linen as night draws in, sipping white wine under a covered pergola in the garden, the rough wood table littered with randles and stories of past great dinners.

No regrets about abandoning Hollywood? "You make choices that make sense to you at the time," Rachel says. "I was never that driven as an actress. I did enjoy it at the time – and acting was fun, but it was all such a huge compromise. It was very frustrating and it wasn't my voice," she says.

Rachel, like quicksilver, doesn't linger long over anything and she's now far more interested in her career behind the camera as a scriptwriter-director and her yearning to throw light on the mysteries of life by telling real stories about real people.

"I'm completely over the acting thing. Way over that – I do voice-overs these days. I go in for half a day, earn good money, then walk away. I'm much more interested in making a feature film, and I will," she says.

Conscious of the restrictions of audience interest and tolerance, Rachel is realistic about the tales she can tell. "I might get mileage from four stories before audiences start to say, 'oh I've seen that before, I know how it's going to end!'"

Rachel has already found success with her films, and her recent work, one of a series of 50-minute dramas, *Martha's New Coat*, was recently shown on SBS. Starring daughter Matilda Brown, it won critical acclaim at last year's Australian Film Industry Awards.

While not driven by commercial success, Rachel is a passionate seeker of what is real. "I put big emphasis on a good yarn with a beginning, a middle and an end," she says. "Stories have to have truth to them. I just find that the things we make up are far less interesting than



Clockwise from top left: Rachel riding up to the house; Rachel, her son Joe, and his friends checking the cattle; Much of the property is bushland, which is great for riding but not always ideal for farming; The riding party circles one of the farm's dams before diving in and cooling off; Wild life is often a rough wooden wall by the house; Rachel on the veranda's hammock.

things that really happen. And what's the point of telling fictional stories unless you can throw some light on something?" she says.

Rachel Ward has been blessed in life – from her privileged upbringing to her beauty, fame, charm, three fantastic kids and film-star husband. And not only is she part of a successful 22-year marriage, she also has a successful career and lives between houses in Sydney's Balmain, Whale Beach and this magnificent farm. Perhaps most importantly, she has the boundless energy to enjoy, and drive it all.

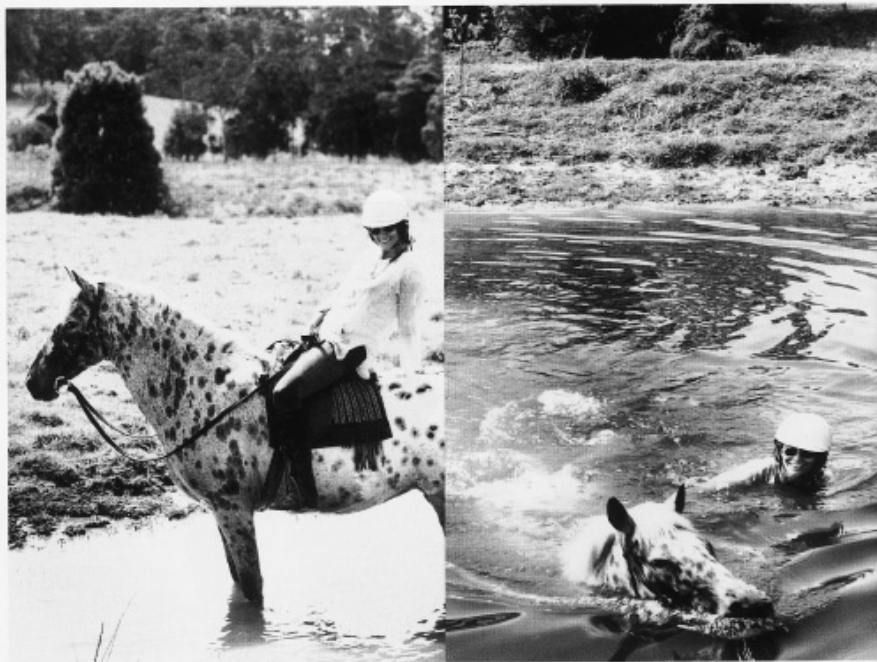
Rachel has a lot to be envious of, and she understands and acknowledges that. "Yes I've been lucky, but on the other hand I've made good choices and I take credit for it in the end. For a long time I just thought I'm lucky and felt guilty for it. But I do think I've been smart in the good choices I've made, from leaving Hollywood when I did, to marrying Bryan and having kids. I suppose I'm a very content person," she says.

The farm plays an important part in this contentment. "The kids are older now, and there's only so much of the country they can take. But for me it'll always be a refuge, somewhere to come and chill. My eldest, Rosie, who is 20, doesn't come here much, but she'll come back to it. Matilda has it in her spirit; she rides, disappears for hours and loves it and so does Joe. And of course, Bryan adores the place".

Rachel is known for her social conscience and has been active on a number of environmental matters. "I'm not really plugged into the local environment," she says. "I know I'm not ruining it, that I'm putting in stuff that brings the birds back, that I'm not irrigating more than I should be and that I'm not putting anything into the soil that I shouldn't. I can't bear those people who create properties that take over the landscape and scream 'look at me' with all their possessions.

"Being almost six hours from Sydney, there are no 'smarties' around here. This is a tight community of small-scale, North Coast farmers battling for a living. You can still hear the noise of tractors everywhere and everyone's got their chickens and their veggie patch. It's quite different to Coffs Harbour (about an hour up the Princes Highway where Russell Crowe, Jack Thompson and singer Wendy Matthews have farms)," she adds.

Rachel has embraced the country experience and its ethos, but isn't yet ready to live it full-time. As she says, there's just too much to do elsewhere. "I'm always doing a million things at once – like our recent charity ball". Underestimating her contribution to this event, which for many would have been a full-time job, Rachel was the force behind 'The Mother of All Balls' which in September 2004 raised \$500,000 for the YWCA's mentoring program, giving wayward children a new direction in life.



Rachel, here taking an impromptu dip in the dam, could never be confused with a precious movie princess. Her natural and unpretentious approach to life has endeared her to thousands of fans.