

**The Sun-Herald**

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# Home-grown food tops the bill



FINE PRODUCE ON THE DOORSTEP: Ben Sales in the kitchen at Majors Lane Cafe.

Picture: BROCK PERKS

**By WINSOR DOBBIN**

THE Hunter Valley already has an international reputation for its wines. Now one young chef has made it his mission to show the region can produce top-class cuisine, too.

Ben Sales, who started his cooking career at 14, wants to prove Hunter produce is among the best in Australia.

Mr Sales, 28, is the chef at Majors Lane Cafe at Lovedale and is using local produce whenever he can to help promote the region's farmers and growers.

"We are very fortunate in the Hunter Valley to have a fabulous range of high-quality fresh and locally produced ingredients," Mr Sales said. "Lots of fruit

and veg, of course, but also top-grade meat, specialty cheeses, condiments.

"I'd guess that 80 per cent of the produce I use is local, but the small producers do not promote themselves so often. There's a lot of great stuff out there, but you have to find it.

"There are also our own olive products. Not many chefs have the opportunity to serve a salad dressed with oil grown in the restaurant's backyard."

Cheeses from the boutique Binnorie Dairy feature heavily on the restaurant's menu with local quail, beef and lamb, and chutneys and jams made on the premises, "and we get great seafood coming in to Newcastle".

Maitland-born Mr Sales made history

when he qualified as a chef at 17. He was the youngest chef in NSW, having gained permission from his school principal and the State Government to begin his apprenticeship earlier than normal.

"There are plenty of kids now doing what I did, but at the time it was quite groundbreaking," he said. Mr Sales became executive chef at La Scala as a teenager and has spent the past decade at several restaurants in the region.

Last year he opened the Majors Lane Cafe, adjacent to the Lovedale winery's cellar door, and recently completed building a smokehouse where he plans to cure local meats.

Mr Sales believes in pricing his food so it is appealing to locals, as well as visitors.