

# SPANISH PASSION

*gives Aussie foals a great start*

**'WILD' IS THE WORD THAT RANGY, RED HEADED SPANIARD JUAN NAVARRO-REVERTER USES TO DESCRIBE HIS UNUSUAL PROFESSION AS A HORSE MIDWIFE AND FOAL TRAINER AT WIDDEN** WORDS AND IMAGES: PHILIPA TLASKAL



**T**he legendary Widden Stud, known as the 'Valley of Champions' in the Hunter Valley, four hours' drive from Sydney, is where Juan Navarro-Reverter, 51, has made his home for the last five years.

Widden Stud's isolation and sheer size (9000 acres), has attracted international horsemen like Juan, drawn by its wild frontier and its world of intensive Thoroughbred breeding requiring an equally intense work and play ethic.

"Studs in Europe have ten people doing a job that one of us does at Widden," said Juan, when interviewed late last year, having just come out of the 2022 foaling season.

He spends this precious downtime not on horseback, but astride a 1200 horsepower dirt bike that his fellow club riders aptly dub 'The Mother Ship'.

He chuckles about fellow riders' reactions to his job: "There were 100 guys on this Great Divide Ride up in Queensland, and none of them had ever met a male midwife of horses, some were amazed, some started with the dirty jokes, but they all said, what the hell - what's with this guy?!"

In his thick Spanish accent where his words crowd together like horses at the starting gates, Juan introduces himself as 'the Prince of Darkness'.

A small gold crucifix hangs on a long chain around his neck.

He is not a vampire or a priest, but during the five-month foaling season from July to November, the lives of the 350 Widden foals born at night, lie in his square, calloused hands.

"They are all my creations," he says with a grin. "I am the first face that they see.

"The window between joy and tragedy is just five to ten minutes in a foaling and that is when I am really needed."

Passing through the front gates of Widden, draws you into a green pastured, enchanted kingdom, established in the 1850s, defended by the stony ramparts of Wollemi National Park.

The drawbridge into this bastion of Thoroughbreds is a narrow concrete slab over a bubbling creek. It regularly floods, isolating the 30 staff and 700 horses for days.

The stunning mountains with formations like 'The Cat's Ears' remind Juan of the harshly beautiful landscapes of his native Madrid where he owned a successful stud with his older brother.

His father Javier, was also a breeder and one of the first to introduce Kentucky Thoroughbreds into Spain in the 1950s.

A career highlight in England was while managing Highclere Stud (made famous as 'Downton Abbey') Juan was presented to Queen Elizabeth II in Newbury in 2010 when she came to inspect the stallions.

But seven years later, the fairytale was over, and he had had enough of freezing winters and the stifling routine.

"In my 40s, I craved a new challenge. I knew little of Australia except that it was hot, the studs were huge and there were wide open roads to ride a motorbike," he said, throwing out his arms to encompass the mountain view from his verandah.

"In 2018, I sent out emails to three studs and Widden was the first to reply to my offer to manage the foaling night watch which is notoriously hard to staff."

He remembers his first eye-opening days in the valley fondly: "Starting at Widden was the best. Wild.

"Coming from Europe where everything with racehorses was so exquisitely managed, here I was thrown into the deep end.

"I was used to foalings being in a barn with straw and a dozen people, but here they pointed me out to the dark paddocks where the broodmares were and said, 'Go find them!'"

While some equine vets don't agree with the term 'horse midwife', there is no other term to describe the unique service Juan provides from birth to foal training at six months, after which they are weaned and join the yearling crew.

He leads me into his personal fiefdom – a checkerboard of immaculate foaling paddocks that diminish in size as the mare progresses through her 11 months gestation.

When Juan settles them in here, they may be in the advanced stages of labour with the foal's front feet already sticking out.

It's after 5pm at Widden or 'wine time' and one of the female managers comes by and remarks: "It's a sight to see Juan at three o'clock in the morning pulling out a foal with one hand, getting the placenta bucket into position with the other and keeping an eye on five other mares!"



At far-flung Widden, the closest help is a kilometre away, so Juan's midwife role is even more specialised in difficult and complicated births.

His years of experience means that he knows: "You need to observe dozens of normal births so you know what is a bad one."

Juan has embraced the more natural approach to foaling in Australia.

"In Europe, it's maximum intervention but at Widden with the tougher, fitter Australian mares, they are better able to give birth safely with less intervention," he said.

"When I first came here it was just me and my old black tomcat doing seven to eight foalings a night.

"90% of the time I can manage alone but 10% of the time I need a hand from the stud vet.

"The managers know that if I'm the one calling on the walkie talkie, it's serious! But if you are calm and well organised, you'll be fine."

He laughs, "One night, the cat scared off a rogue fox who would pull the placentas out of the mares. That was a tricky write up in the foaling book.

"At Widden, it is the huge numbers of foals that make this no ordinary job, the stress is multiplied," says Juan, walking me through the airy stables.

He points out a blind mare with her inquisitive foal who nuzzles his arm, and remarks; "But they're all just mares to me – I don't check on how much they're worth before I birth them – a \$2.5 million beauty



queen gets the same care as an old mare like this one with one eye and one ear!"

Juan's dedication and honed skills have made him an indispensable part of the international Widden team.

During the worst of the COVID pandemic in 2019, he was holidaying in Europe and Widden wrangled him a seat on one of the few chartered flights out of an empty Heathrow, shoulder-to-shoulder with diplomats and surgeons in order to be back in time for the foaling season.

Juan's 'Colosseum' is what he calls the handling yard, where, like any good Dad, he teaches his foals their first lessons.

His motto, 'You can't rush art!' is scrawled on the whiteboard by the imposing high walled yard.

It takes a week of intense sessions to tame a foal and he trains 20 foals a week for the first five months of the year.

Juan regularly has younger horse trainers hanging off the top rails of the padded yard to watch his gentle handling techniques which can turn a 250kg 'psycho' into a demure and well behaved debutante.

He hangs up the worn training halter: "I sing to them and talk to them in Spanish, they always listen," he says with a smile.

"Weaning takes place the following week so we want them to be nice to us, no fights, no drama."

The foals that he birthed just five months before, edge up to him like leggy fans at a rock concert while their watchful mothers look on.

Their dainty noses trustingly sniff at his shirt or they boldly stick a head under his arm for a cuddle.

The transformation is miraculous when just in the next paddock is next week's mob of 'brumby foals' bucking and shying away from humans.

"Delivering a trusting, well-adjusted foal to an owner is a great feeling," he says, rubbing a foal's nose with an open palm.

As a long standing member of staff, Juan is a mentor to the dozens of young Australian and international stud workers who start their careers at Widden every year.

He encourages them to: "Give it a try. Everyone

wants to be the 'man with the finger' (the manager) but you have to go through the purgatory," he says, touching his crucifix.

He recalls his father sending him as a 16-year-old teenager with little English to work at an Irish stud for his first foaling season.

"I was picking up 'poop' and leaves for 25 Irish pounds a week given in a little brown envelope - and I still have one of those envelopes!

"It represents the s..t work you have to do to get started in this industry."

He adds with a wink: "Don't get me wrong, like most studs, the parties go off and like with everything at Widden - it's bigger! You know how a party starts but not how it finishes!"

Widden is one many rural businesses missing the 170,000 shortfall in backpackers who used to do a lot of the mucking out and feeding on the farm.

Without them, Juan and the rest of the team have to work a lot harder.

He still sets an alarm at 5am every day and finishes at 5pm or later.

He adds, lighting a cigarette: "Working with animals is a very cruel life - you see death, you see pain and blood; they will frustrate you and you have to keep calm."

Juan says he cannot have a coffee on the mornings he is dealing with difficult foals as they will pick up his jitters.

He continues: "And you will deal with people who are more difficult than the animals.

"Having to call the owner if the animal dies or a mare is not pregnant after a \$170,000 cover is a lot harder than picking up poop."

And yet, sitting on the verandah of his idyllic cabin overlooking the rolling fields full of his recent foals, Juan finishes with a broad smile.

"At the end of the toughest night though, to see a herd of foals being turned out on the paddock and galloping together, racing each other, moving as one, that's the most stunning sight.

"If you don't see the beauty of that, you're in the wrong job!" **RNSW**