THE COUNTRY WEB

The Country Web is produced by NSW Department of Primary Industries Rural Women’s Network (RWN) and is distributed free, three times a year. For more about RWN see page 5.

EDITING/DESKTOP PUBLISHING

Allison Priest

CONTRIBUTIONS

Letters, stories, poems and photographs from rural women and their families are welcome.

FREE MAILING LIST

If you live in New South Wales and would like to be on our free mailing list, contact RWN.

ADVERTISING

12,000 copies of The Country Web are produced each edition. We welcome advertisements and offer competitive rates. Contact RWN for more information. Sponsorship and insert options also available.

CONTACT DETAILS

Rural Women’s Network
Locked Bag 21
Orange NSW 2800
Ph: 02 6391 3620
Fax: 02 6391 3650
TTY: 02 6391 3300
Email: rural.women@dpi.nsw.gov.au
Website: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rwn

COMPETITION TERMS & CONDITIONS

See page 23 for competitions.

1. Information on how to enter and prize details form part of the Terms & Conditions. By entering the competition, entrants accept these Terms & Conditions.
2. To enter, you must provide your full name and postal details, and in 25 words or less answer the competition question.
3. Entries must be posted to the stated address by the stated date.
4. This competition is a game of skill. The best answer as judged by the RWN will win. The judges’ decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.
Prizes cannot be transferred or redeemed for cash. The winner will be notified by mail within 14 days from the judging date.

DISCLAIMER

Recognising that some of the information in this document is provided by third parties, the NSW Department of Primary Industries, the State of New South Wales, the author and the publisher take no responsibility for the accuracy, currency, reliability and correctness of any information included in the document provided by such third parties. The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up-to-date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of NSW Department of Primary Industries, or the user’s independent adviser.

© State of New South Wales through NSW Department of Primary Industries 2009. You may copy, distribute and otherwise freely deal with this publication for any purpose, provided that you attribute NSW Department of Primary Industries as the owner.

FEATURES

6 Kim’s taste of success
An advocate of food and wine production for the Central West, Kim Currie was recently named the 2009 NSW RIRDC Rural Women’s Award Winner, recognising her commitment to improving agritourism and using farmers’ markets and other initiatives to boost awareness of food production efforts in NSW.

8 Daring to dream
Debbie Allard and Sue Harnett have established a farmhouse cheese making enterprise on a small farm factory at Mooball on the Far North Coast. They have learned to work together as an effective team, juggling farming and family responsibilities.

10 The fresh new link in the food chain
Farmers’ markets reconnect us to seasonality, they reduce food miles, they grow and nurture small food enterprises, they build proud connected communities. Jane Adams, Chair of the Australian Farmers’ Markets Association, shares the history of farmers’ markets in Australia.

14 Tucker without tantrums
Feeding children can be a challenge. This article offers some suggestions to make meal time more enjoyable and to assist in getting toddlers to eat.

16 Saving the world — a garden at a time
In this article, Liz Bastian shares her thoughts on permaculture and provides some practical ideas for readers to practise permaculture in their own ‘backyard’.

REGULAR FEATURES

3 Editorial
3 Calendar
4 Letters
5 From Sonia’s desk
14 Parenting
23 Book reviews
25 Grants/Funding
24 Health
29 Women in Decision Making
30 SAC Update
32 Web Watch
33 What’s on, What’s new?
34 Resources

contents
This issue of Country Web is a small ‘taste’ of the many aspects of food. We hope that it is a trigger for you to think more, or in different ways, about food – to see food and the food system, its production, marketing and consumption through ‘new eyes’. Michael Symons in his book, One continuous picnic, writes that ‘nothing is so simultaneously fundamental to survival and yet so embroiling of civilisation as food’.

Speaking personally, from the number and variety of cook books and boxes full of newspaper cuttings of recipes that I have and ‘might try one day’, you would think that I am a gourmet cook – unfortunately I’m not, but I do try. My family often joke, that if I cook something good, that is the only time they will get it – not realising that it was a matter of luck. I do cook good cakes though and I have the Country Women’s Association cookbooks, including the latest one.

For my family, food has always been central to special family occasions. My mother was known as a good cook, and she would always cook our favourite food for our birthdays. When she was lapsing in and out of consciousness as she was dying she was re-living cooking Christmas dinner – telling my daughter to help her stir the pudding, and to watch the food in the oven. ‘I think I’ll lie down for a little while’, she said, ‘I’m not feeling too good – I’ll just have a little rest, and then I’ll be right.’

Patrick Holden of the UK Soil Institute has coined the term ‘Food Crunch’, similar to the ‘Credit Crunch’. The term food crunch recognises the need to consider the coming together of many factors including the impact of climate change, the decrease in the availability of oil, and increasing competition for access to our natural resources. In Australia we are faced with water shortages, which are critical in the Murray Darling and Murrumbidgee River Systems, known as the Food Bowl. Australia is particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change. We need to develop food systems for the future that are fair and sustainable for consumers, producers, our regional communities and the environment.

Paul Roberts in his book, The end of food, the coming crisis in the world food industry, argues that the era of superabundance has come to an end, and a new era of geopolitics is beginning. The pressures of low cost food production can damage the environment and increase contamination and disease, such as food poisoning.

In today’s world, food shortages are often thought of as a thing of the past, but in 2008 there were food riots in several countries, with the price of grain increasing by 700 per cent. This was attributed to many factors, including the use of grain for biofuel, the diversion of grain into animal feed to support increasing consumer demand for meat in India and China, and market speculation. There is now an increasing groundswell of concern on the future of food, and food security.

Patel in his book, Stuffed & Starved, highlighted the paradox that around 800 million to 1 billion people are starving, but 1 billion are obese, according to the World Health Organisation.

A general perception in Australia is that everyone has enough to eat, but many indigenous people do not have access to fresh, affordable food (see Rebecca Huntley’s Eating Between the Lines). A survey in South Western Sydney found that 22 per cent of households and 45 per cent of single parent households experienced food insecurity, figures that will increase with increasing unemployment.

As consumers we are bombarded with messages about food. For some of us eating is no longer a simple pleasurable pastime, but one tinged with guilt, and there are the serious issues of anorexia, bulimia, and body image.

I hope you enjoy this edition of The Country Web and that it does indeed provide ‘food for thought’.

Assoc. Prof. Dr Frances Parker, Rural Women’s Network State Advisory Committee Member

---

**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

**JULY 2009**

24–25, MUDGEE
Mudgee Small Farm Field Days. For more information go to: www.arec.com.au

5-17, NATIONAL
NAIDOC week is a celebration of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander cultures and an opportunity to recognise the contributions of Indigenous Australians. This year’s theme, Honouring Our Elders, Nurturing Our Youth, encourages communities to acknowledge the status of our Elders as leaders and role models for our youth. For more information go to: www.naidoc.org.au

**SEPTEMBER 2009**

18–20, JUNEE
The historic town of Junee will host the 17th annual Women’s Gathering and organisers are hoping you’ll be making tracks to participate in this dynamic and fun-filled weekend of events. Keynote speakers include: Ella James; Petreia King; and local girls, Toni Nugent and Kerryn Macaulay. Look out for the next edition of The Country Web which will feature a 4-page pullout including the official program, workshop lists and registration, tent city and travel information. Contact Nikki Condon on Ph: 02 6924 8114 or go to: www.junee.nsw.gov.au/html/women_s_gathering.html

**OCTOBER 2009**

22–23, SYDNEY
The 2009 Sydney Food Fairness Alliance (SFFA) Food Summit — ‘Hungry for change: shaping food policies that are fair and sustainable’ will provide an opportunity for concerned individuals, community organisations, government and industry to frame a statewide policy that will provide fair access to affordable and nutritious food; further develop sustainable food systems; and support successful strategies to meet challenges. For more information go to: www.sydneyfoodfairness.org.au

**WHAT’S NEXT?**

The next edition of The Country Web will look at ‘Re-engaging’. We’re looking for stories from people helping to re-build communities by re-invigorating community spirit and creating a renewed sense of community as well as stories on re-engaging in education, the workforce, family, hobbies, travel, relationships, life after illness, reconciliation, etc.

Contributions are required by 23 June for publication in August.

Send your contributions to: The Country Web, Locked Bag 21, Orange NSW 2800, Fax to: 02 6391 3650 or Email: allison.priest@dpi.nsw.gov.au
City starts realising farmers’ roles

The speed at which our climate is changing is forcing us to transform rapidly rather than evolve slowly. To me this transformational change is clearly evident in city dwellers’ dawning realisation of the importance of agriculture and food production in their lives. Over the past few years I have given several presentations to non-rural audiences about the huge impact of their food choices on rural economies and the natural environment.

People were quite shocked to think their individual preferences for cheap, blemish-free produce were collectively having such a devastating effect on the rural sector and landscape, but while food was cheap, there was not a lot of incentive for them to change their food habits.

But now, with the long-running drought forcing up food prices quite dramatically, I notice that concern about food availability and cost is a common topic of conversation among many of my city friends.

Suddenly, agriculture is on the urban agenda, admittedly driven by the hip-pocket nerve, but city people are transforming the way they interact with food production. Not only is there more concern for farmers and their plight, there is renewed and growing interest in school and home food gardening, food preserving, and supporting local food producers.

For instance, the Hawkesbury Harvest (hawkesburyharvest.com.au) and Hunter Harvest initiatives (hunterharvest.com) are two groups helping city people connect with local farmers, and in Wollongong, Food Fairness Illawarra is raising the profile of food.

In Victoria, LandLearn, a statewide schools education program, supports teachers to integrate edible gardens in the schools curriculum (www.landlearn.net.au) while the Kitchen Garden Program provides education for young children to positively influence their food choices (kitchengardenfoundation.org.au).

And the Cultivating Community group helps communities establish food gardens (cultivatingcommunity.org.au/cc).

The long-running Seed Savers Network has produced a free online manual for schools on food growing and seed saving (www.seedsavers.net/school-gardens).

Public-minded individuals are also running informative websites such as the Urban Food Garden (http://users.ncable.net.au/~urbanfoodgarden) to help people regain food gardening skills.

City people are beginning to realise the crucial importance of farmers and agriculture in their lives, and are starting to take more responsibility for their food choices.

Rebecca Lines-Kelly, Wollongbar

Surprises and successes

It was back in Autumn 2008 that I featured in The Country Web in an article about moving from the city to the countryside. I thought you may be interested in reading about the amazing and unexpected response I received to this article and my resultant year.

Firstly, a number of local women, including my whole book club, gave me wonderful feedback about the article. The local Country Women’s Association sent me a congratulatory letter and people would often stop me down the street to comment about the article.

The local Lions Club invited me to give a talk to their club about moving to our small town from the city and how our family adapted and what services we found helpful in making the change. As a result of this talk, the Deputy Mayor of our town recommended our family for a front-page story in our local newspaper. My story was then picked up by the Riverina Regional Development Board that recommended our family feature in an article about Tree Change in The Land Newspaper in late November.

I have so thoroughly enjoyed my (unexpected) year discussing our tree change move (which happened back in 2004). It has felt very positive and I hope it has been of benefit to my town and perhaps some city dwellers contemplating making the change. And all as a result of The Country Web.

On another note, I spent 2008 pursuing a lifelong dream to write. I joined Wagga Wagga Writer’s Centre, attended a number of writer’s workshops, entered short story competitions and had one prose story published. I was interested in the theme of your next issue (Food for Thought) and I have written an article with this in mind, inspired by a recent Christmas present. [See page 11 to read Jo’s story].

Best wishes for 2009 and again, thank you for an interesting 2008.

Jo Wilson-Ridley, Coleambally

New project to promote local food production

I live on a rural property at Pearces Creek in the Northern Rivers area. I am currently developing a project to promote local food production by setting up a network of community-owned supermarkets.

My plan is to develop the EcoMart website by gaining input from as many people as possible via the wiki. The ideas of rural women would be valuable both as producers and as shoppers.

For more information go to: www.ecomartaustralia.org

Effie Ablett, Pearces Creek

Coonamble Women’s Gathering Committee receives Australia Day Award

The Coonamble Women’s Gathering was awarded the Coonamble Australia Day Community Event of 2008. The Award was accepted by Raquel Pickering (Secretary, Coonamble Women’s Gathering Committee).

This is an excerpt from her speech.

To win this Award in a year that was so full with wonderful community events is indeed a privilege and a huge surprise. We tested new ideas and ways of doing things, and the success we achieved is due largely to the determination and the fortitude of the smallest, hardworking committee in town!

Our appreciation goes to NSW Department of Primary Industries and its Rural Women’s Network for selecting us to host the 2008 Gathering and for the financial backing to allow us to do so.

Many thanks in particular to Coonamble Shire Council for supporting this event, as well as the corporate sponsors, community groups and individuals in town who, in many cases, went above and beyond the call to duty to assist.

I strongly encourage participation in any community organisation and activity, as it was through working with so many people, that I could see how justifiably proud we are of our town, its people and our achievements.

Raquel Pickering, Coonamble
from Sonia’s desk

CHANGES IN RWN — NEW COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNIT FORMED

It looks like being a challenging year for everyone across the globe and the RWN is not immune to change. From 1 April I moved into a new role as Manager of a small Community Engagement Unit which includes the RWN, schools education, events and stakeholder engagement. After 17 years of focusing on rural women it’s time to leap out of my own comfort zone and take on new challenges. I will still take a strong interest in RWN activities but my hands-on role will be somewhat diminished. Allison Priest (returning part-time from maternity leave) will still produce The Country Web and be a key contact person for the RWN.

Wendy Bortolazzo finished her contract with the RWN and had a baby girl, Anna in April. We wish her well in the adventures ahead and thank her for her creative contributions to the RWN.

FOOD (FOR THOUGHT)

I like to eat. Food is essential to life and yet do we really appreciate where it comes from and what’s involved in getting food into our tummies? Do we spend time savouring our food? How many of us eat on the run, at our desk, or in front of the TV without enjoying the act of eating or thinking about it’s origins? It takes the body 20 minutes to register fullness so why not time yourself and make sure every meal you spend at least half an hour eating and enjoying the experience!

The Kentucky farmer, writer and academic, Wendell Berry sees eating as ‘an agricultural act’ and suggests we need to see ourselves as more than passive consumers and suggests we ‘participate in food production to the extent that you can. If you have a yard or even just a porch box or a pot in a sunny window, grow something to eat in it. Make a little compost of your kitchen scraps and use it for fertilizer. Only by growing some food for yourself can you become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again. You will be fully responsible for any food that you grow for yourself, and you will know all about it. You will appreciate it fully, having known it all its life.’

He also encourages us to:

1. Prepare your own food.
   This means reviving in your own mind and life the arts of the kitchen. This should enable you to eat more cheaply and give you a measure of ‘quality control’. You will also have some reliable knowledge of what has been added to the food you eat.

2. Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home. The idea that every locality should be, as much as possible, the source of its own food makes sense. The locally produced food supply is the most secure, the freshest, and the easiest for local consumers to know about and influence.

3. Whenever possible, deal directly with a local farmer.
   All the reasons listed for the previous suggestion apply here. In addition, you eliminate the whole pack of merchants, transporters, processors, packagers and advertisers who thrive at the expense of both producers and consumers.

(Adapted from: www.stjoan.com/ecosp/docs/pleasures_of_eating_by_wendell_b.htm)

We can’t predict the future but we can certainly try to imagine what could happen and prepare as best we can. I like the approach from the recent Australian Conservation Foundation’s report, Paddock to Plate, Food Farming and Victoria’s Progress to Sustainability, by Andrew Campbell (October 2008) who says the challenge is to:

‘…develop farming systems that are more intrinsically Australian: that are resilient in the face of extreme weather and extreme seasonal variability; that are miserly with water and conserving energy; that maintain good ground cover and are kind to the soil; that sit tightly on the landscape and don’t displace native wildlife or habitat; that are highly profitable in good seasons and don’t lose money on bad seasons; that preserve and build their natural, human and financial capital; that recover quickly from shocks and stress; that attract and retain young, talented people on the land; that generate jobs and income in regional communities; and that produce things in high demand for good prices.’

I hope this edition of The Country Web gets you thinking about food from some different perspectives.

SONIA MUIR
MANAGER, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNIT

Contact RWN on:
Ph: 02 6391 3620
Fax: 02 6391 3650
rural.women@dpi.nsw.gov.au

Kim’s taste of success

2009 Rural Women’s Award Winner

A passionate advocate of food and wine production for the central west, Orange’s Kim Currie was recently named the winner of this year’s NSW RIRDC Rural Women’s Award at a special Gala Dinner held at Parliament House, Sydney in March. Kim’s award recognises her commitment to improving agritourism, and using farmers’ markets and other initiatives to boost awareness of food production efforts in NSW, and help strengthen rural communities.

Kim’s passion for food and wine production and promotion was sparked when she moved to Australia from New Zealand and put her self-taught cooking skills to use.

‘I have a brother and sister who are trained as chefs, but I taught myself to cook. Over time and with the support of the community and local producers, I started to get involved in food and eventually wine.’

Living in Rylstone for 24 years working as a chef and then running the Rylstone Food Store and restaurant for two years, Kim developed a close relationship with the region’s producers.

‘That introduction to producers not only shaped how I learnt to cook and how I came to teach others, but it underlined why it was so important.”

A strong advocate for primary industries and the interests of rural women, Kim and her three sons and daughter moved to Orange in 2006, where she became the first Executive Officer of Brand Orange — a wine and food tourism initiative which promotes and develops the region as Taste Orange. Kim is working to achieve greater recognition and more opportunities for local wines and food through an industry development strategy that also integrates regional food and tourism.

Kim says local community and industry groups have created a growing network which supports Taste Orange.

‘They are not just about bringing tourism to the region, they are about supporting our local community.

‘Not only are we returning greater profits to farmers and the wider community through the multiplier effect but the health benefits of really fresh produce are enormous — the integration with the community, the way that people get to know each other and support each other’.

Now that extensive regional food and wine networks exist, Kim and her team are focussing on promoting local produce to the broader market.

‘Sydney is the biggest consumer marketplace so Taste Orange at Bondi is our major annual consumer event.’

Under Kim’s leadership, Brand Orange produced the local visitor guide, now a key tool in food event promotion and Kim manages the partnership program with Orange City Council bringing together 300 local tourism ventures.

‘There are something like 1800 businesses in Orange which benefit from tourism, so we would like to see that 300 members grow enormously, but our first challenge is to make sure that we’re delivering for those businesses so that means consulting to find out what their needs are and ensuring tourism in this region is delivering in partnership with industry.

Kim helped establish farmers’ markets in Cowra, Bathurst, Mudgee and Orange, and the Australian Farmers’ Market Network. She wants to expand this relationship between farmers and consumers.

‘One of the ways we can do that is by using the town square, and that is one of the things I would also like to study as part of my Rural Women’s Award bursary — how other cities and communities utilise their town squares as a centrepiece for bringing in not only producers but all elements of their community in regular activities.’

Kim is involved in driving other grassroots initiatives such as the Glenroi Community Kitchen in Orange, a slow food project to help support local women and families.

‘Slow Food Orange runs the Community Kitchen. It is an opportunity for people who wouldn’t normally get access to fresh food or necessarily have great skills in cooking to come together weekly. We teach them cooking skills, using fresh produce donated by local
suppliers and then we share a meal together.’

Many of Kim’s achievements are inspired through the support of female networks and mentors. ‘I feel like I’m a representative of all the women in this community who work together. I would not have had the confidence to be involved with this Award if I hadn’t had that support. So many women I know are every bit as capable as I am.’

Kim wants to extend the choices available to women in rural communities by mentoring others and by encouraging them to pursue their goals. ‘I would encourage anybody who had wondered about doing something like this and perhaps lacked confidence or who thought there were other people more worthy, to recognise their skills and just go for it.’

Kim’s interest in agritourism is inspired by the obvious advantages of the producer market concept including accessibility, convenience, strengthening of local and regional food systems, sustainability and its potential to bridge the divide between rural and urban communities. Her ultimate goal is to help develop vibrant regional communities by linking local produce, people and experiences.

Using the Award bursary, Kim will travel to renowned agritourism regions, such as Provence and Tuscany, to learn ways of better integrating local produce, people and experiences, resulting in more dynamic rural communities. She hopes to increase her understanding of the successful farmers’ market models and how they contribute to paddock-to-plate marketing and agritourism and to share this information with others.

Kim Currie and Gillian Hogendyk (see right) were presented with their 2009 RIRDC Rural Women’s Award certificates by Premier Rees at a special presentation dinner at Parliament House, Sydney on March 9. The dinner was attended by 100 guests from industry, government and community and was supported by our 2009 Award Sponsors: NSW Department of Primary Industries, the Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation, NSW Farmers’ Association, Department of State & Regional Development, Department of Environment & Climate Change NSW, the Office for Women’s Policy, The Australian Women’s Weekly, Rural Press Limited and ABC Radio.

The dinner was a wonderful opportunity to recognise and support rural women in NSW whose work is contributing to more vibrant and sustainable rural communities.

Applications for the 2010 Award open on 1 August 2009. For more information contact RWN. A list of past winners and finalists who have agreed to act as mentors is also available.

2009 RIRDC Rural Women’s Award Runner-up: Gillian Hogendyk

Gillian is passionate about conservation of natural resources and involving rural communities in wetland conservation. Originally from Cooma, Gillian’s love of animals led to a career as a vet working in Cowra, Orange and Narrabri, before working as a Veterinary Inspector for the former Rural Lands Protection Board based in Dubbo. The Macquarie Valley is now home to Gillian and her family who run an irrigation and cropping property at Warren, with Gillian’s focus moving from her vet work to local environmental challenges.

Roles with WIRES (Wildlife Information Rescue & Education Service) and the National Parks Advisory Committee led Gillian to explore local wetlands and write their history in The Macquarie Marshes: an Ecological History. Her work soon sparked the interest of Macquarie River Food & Fibre, leading to the formation of a unit trust to purchase the small property, Burrima, in the marshes to be managed for conservation purposes.

Gillian and her fellow trustees set about improving the surrounding land through initiatives including saltbush planting, with support from the Central West Catchment Management Authority. Now school and university students are sharing in Burrima’s learning journey, with Gillian regularly leading tours through the marshes.

Gillian hopes one day to tour wetlands managed by non-Government, community organisations or private land owners in the Murray-Darling Basin and other parts of Australia to gain a greater appreciation of the diversity and possibilities for private conservation initiatives to be developed on working properties.

She strongly believes that productive and sustainable farming (including irrigated agriculture) can sit side-by-side with the enhancement of environmental values for the benefit of the whole community.

She would like to see other irrigation communities, particularly their female members, take up the challenge of getting involved in addressing the environmental bottom line.
Daring to dream

Debbie Allard and Sue Harnett joined forces to establish a farmhouse cheese making enterprise on a small farm factory at Mooball near Burringbar on the Far North Coast. They have learned to work together as an effective team and to juggle farming and family responsibilities.

‘Tweed Valley Whey Farmhouse Cheeses’ opened in April 2008 after many months of planning and completing three cheesemaking courses. The fledgling business processes about 500 L of milk a week into about 10 different types of soft cheeses and yoghurts which Sue and Debbie sell through farmers’ markets and local shops. They have two children each, and husbands who have had to learn to be cheese widowers!

WHAT GAVE YOU THE MOTIVATION/ INSPIRATION TO FOLLOW YOUR DREAM?
Debbie: Sue and I had been friends for years and were involved in community activities such as restoring the local hall. We’d both seen an ABC landline program on cheese making about four years ago and thought perhaps that was something we could do one day when the kids were a bit older. When a friend approached Sue about buying their milk to make cheese, both she and I decided it was time to give it a go. We did the course and then made cheese for about six months before we set up the factory. We use recipe books and have done other courses. Sue is the milk expert, being co-owner of a dairy farm for over 14 years, and her science background has been very useful.

Sue: We made a pact after doing the cheese course that we would make cheese every week no matter what. We needed to perfect the product and ensure we could make it to a consistent quality. We didn’t have any failures. We hosted lots of cheese ‘parties’ to get opinions and had lots of great feedback before taking the next step.

AT WHAT POINT DID YOU REALISE THAT YOUR DREAM WAS ACTUALLY POSSIBLE AND WHAT MADE YOU THINK YOU COULD REALLY DO IT?
Debbie: I gained a lot of experience in value adding when we had lots of excess passionfruit on our banana farm. I spent about four years selling the pulp to restaurants and that got us through some lean times.

Just prior to starting the cheese making, I’d been working for a word-of-mouth marketing company, moving up the ranks to become national manager. I gained a lot of knowledge while I was there and went into the cheesemaking enterprise knowing that we wouldn’t have to do much marketing as the cheese would sell itself. This has proved correct. We produce a product that you can’t buy in the supermarket so there is virtually no competition.

We sell at local markets and my dad has become our ‘celebrity chef’, demonstrating the products and helping with tastings.

Sue: The plan from the beginning was to make money. Debbie gave up work about three months before the factory was built and was able to do a lot of the research especially for the Safe Food requirements. We didn’t just start by making cheese for fun. We had a business plan and were focused.

AS A CHILD, WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GREW UP?
Debbie: A fairy! I really didn’t know what I wanted to be. I fell into banking, spent time in the city, worked in the recording industry, travelled overseas and had a job at the local tourist centre in Murwillumbah. My marketing experiences have also been a real bonus.

Sue: I always loved plants and the country. I did my Higher School Certificate in Sydney, worked in secretarial jobs for a few years, and travelled around Australia doing temporary work before spending a year in Lismore studying applied science. I had my own nursery for a couple of years but gave that away when the dairy farm became too demanding.

HOW DID YOUR CHILDHOOD INFLUENCE YOU IN LATER LIFE?
Debbie: Dad was in the Navy and we travelled every two years overseas or within Australia.

I learned to adapt to new situations. Dad retired to a farm in Burringbar when he was 40 and I was 16. I went to Murwillumbah High School and vowed I’d never marry a farmer. I met my farmer husband Jim on a blind date and here I am.

Sue: I am number 10 of 11 children and grew up in the city with a big extended family but always loved the country.

I was 13 when my Mum died so I lived with older siblings while at high school. We would visit relatives on farms and in the Blue Mountains, so I am really happy to have ended up on a farm.

WHO ARE YOUR ROLE MODELS?
Debbie: Women like Madonna who push the boundaries.

Sue: I’m not sure there is any one person in particular but I have the greatest admiration for farmers who really battle against the odds and persevere when the going gets tough.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS MEAN TO YOU?
Debbie: I’ve always wanted to have my own business rather than work for others. It is important to me that people are spreading the word about our cheese. We’ve had some articles in the local press which have generated a lot of interest.

[Image -1x-1 to 596x840]
The more cheese we can make, the more money we make. It is great fun, but there comes a point where we have to stop because we are simply exhausted. The people of Burringbar are very excited and we really hope others can jump on the bandwagon with us and make our village a tourist destination.

Sue: Having a happy family, the ability to earn a decent living off the land, being proud of what you are doing and making a good product. With dairying we didn’t get any feedback about how good that last glass of milk was, but with cheese we get immediate comments and it is very fulfilling.

WHAT HAS BEEN ONE OF THE BIGGEST BARRIERS YOU HAVE HAD TO FACE, WHAT HAPPENED, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

Debbie: Our husbands and families not letting go of us! It has been quite difficult to ‘wean’ the family off me being there full time. It is a gradual process even though I had worked away from home quite a lot with my marketing job. My girls are 12 and 14 and run the house for me. They cook dinner and do the washing. They are fantastic. From day one we have made the factory a space only for the ‘cheese makers’. It has become our little escape haven. We have the best chocolate and gin and tonics there for when we work late.

Sue: Juggling a husband, the kids, a dairy farm and the cheese factory. We both have kids at school so we have to work around that as much as we can. I get up early and drop the milk at the factory. My two boys are 10 and 6. Debbie’s girls are a bit older and after they have caught the school bus she comes and takes over while I get my kids off to school. In the afternoons we always try to combine cheese drop-offs to shops with kid pickups.

A huge hurdle happened on the day we got our Safe Food approval for the factory. We discovered we had an outbreak of cattle tick fever and lost our year’s replacement stock of heifers. Watching the cattle die was simply horrendous. It has been a big hill to climb back up as it has involved a lot of extra work.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN 10 YEARS’ TIME? WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE?

Debbie: Ultimately we hope to have a direct outlet from the farmhouse, run home-based cheesemaking training programs and employ local staff. We also don’t have the coolroom capacity for hard cheeses. These developments are very expensive. At this early stage we are still having fun and want to run everything ourselves. We don’t want to travel to sell our products. We want people to come to our village. Farmhouse cheeses are a niche market. We are using the milk and producing the cheese all on the farm.

Sue: I hope that I am older and wiser, that we are employing staff in the cheese factory, and that my husband Rob can have a break from dairying — he has worked seven days a week most of his working life.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO OTHER WOMEN WHO MAY BE JUST STARTING OUT ON A DARING TO DREAM JOURNEY?

Debbie: Don’t do it by yourself! Get someone to come on board with you. We each have different strengths and qualities and neither of us could have done this without the help of the other. And we both have a good sense of humour which is so important. Do a lot of research. You don’t have to buy new equipment either. We bought lots of our factory gear second hand from eBay and saved lots of money. Get over the fear factor and learn to be strong in dealing with tradespeople. Make sure you have a comprehensive plan on paper and don’t be afraid to ask lots of people to help you. We have been lucky to have a fantastic mentor, Graham Redhead from the Department of Primary Industries in Queensland, who has helped us with advice and information all along the way. We also listen to our customer comments and have made changes to accommodate these. It is so important to surround yourself with positive people and to show young people that hard work can lead to success. The age of forty comes quickly so there is no time for regrets.

Sue: We’d read in a business book that you should do as much planning as you can before you start a business, because once you start you won’t have the time. This is very true. If you can persevere and put in the pre-planning effort, the benefits will come. It is also important to do something you really want to do, that gives a positive ‘vibe’.

A project of NSW Department of Primary Industries Rural Women’s Network, Daring to Dream celebrates and recognises rural women who are playing key roles as achievers and agents of change within their communities by sharing their stories and providing a mechanism for networking and informal mentoring. For more information about the project and to read the latest stories go to: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/rwn and click on ‘projects and activities’ and then ‘daring to dream’.

Your Backyard Farmer

is an innovative approach to community-supported agriculture through urban backyard farming. It was started in 2006 by two women in the US. All they require is a plot of land big enough to feed the mouths involved — 10 feet by 10 feet is about the minimum for an individual or a family of two — along with six hours of direct sunlight a day and an outdoor water source.

In exchange, the farming ‘team’ provides an organic vegetable farm right outside the client’s door, customised to the family’s size and dining choices. Clients get to choose the produce they want grown from a seasonal list of crops. Your Backyard Farmer sets up and then visits the garden once a week to weed, harvest and do any additional planting necessary. Each time they leave, a basket of freshly harvested vegetables is left behind that’s cleaned and ready to be cooked or eaten. There is a weekly fee and for those who want to learn to do it themselves, Your Backyard Farmer also offers an onsite consulting program on topics including soils, pests, disease, garden planning, crop rotation, succession planting, trellising, weeds, transplants versus seeding, cover cropping and more. Maybe you have these skills and can help others become urban farmers, and help yourself to a rewarding new business.

For more information go to: www.yourbackyardfarmer.com
Fresh start
Farmers’ markets: the fresh new link in the food chain

By Jane Adams, Chair, Australian Farmers’ Markets Association

The farmers’ market movement is relatively new in Australia. The first designated producer-led regular farmers’ market commenced operation in 1999 — now there are upward of 120 farmers’ markets trading regularly in communities across Australia, from Albany and Carnarvon in Western Australia to Willunga, St Kilda, Albury, Orange, Wauchope and Byron Bay.

The Australian Farmers’ Markets Association’s recommended definition states, ‘A farmers’ market is a predominantly fresh food market that operates regularly within a community, at a focal public location that provides a suitable environment for farmers and food producers to sell farm-origin and associated value-added processed food products directly to consumers.’

In other words, farmers’ markets offer a new link in the food chain — fresh food sold directly from the paddock that is destined for your dinner plate. Dirty spuds can be sold the morning they are dug, peaches and tomatoes, juicy, sweet and ripe, are picked and sold within hours — healthy fresh food that is seasonal and packed with flavour and good nutrition.

Farmers’ markets are primarily food markets — but there are some exceptions to the edible. Vendors may also sell plants, herbs, flowers, compost, worm farms, seeds, and small livestock — in other words, items that have the potential to grow more food.

If you take your shopping trolley to most farmers’ markets you will find growers and producers selling meat, poultry, seasonal fruit and vegetables, olive oil, nuts, farmhouse cheese, eggs, honey — even live eels. Look too for organics, or produce represented by growers in transition; for heirloom vegetables and occasionally exotics, depending on the local climate. Asian vegetables, tropical fruits, and Australian grown tea and coffee can be found in markets in more northern climates.

On the other end of the food chain, farmers and growers regularly report that selling direct at farmers’ markets is sociable and gives you back control of your business.

Many other smaller producers across Australia report similar outcomes, added to which they are able to build consumer brand awareness, trial new varieties, sell excess or blemished crop — and most importantly reduce their cost of sales so they maximise their profit margin, an advantage that can be a make or break for some farm businesses.

My 10-year involvement with farmers’ markets has continued to reinforce my belief that they have enormous potential to change the way both shoppers and producers relate to food. They reconnect us to seasonality, they reduce food miles, they grow and nurture small food enterprises, they build proud, connected communities — and they can provide a vital, profitable and enjoyable alternative channel to mainstream food retailing.

Some have called farmers’ markets a revolution. I prefer to see their role as a pragmatic win for grassroots change, common sense — and good health.

Farmers’ markets...
‘reconnect us to seasonality, they reduce food miles, they grow and nurture small food enterprises, they build proud, connected communities...’