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Inside This Week



Rainy reunion at Gundagai

Faces at the races

2-3



History under the hammer

The Maple-Browns move on

4-5



Christmas beauties

In Fiona's Garden

8

PLUS

LAND TRADER

Incorporating classifieds and stock and

Bush is the key ingredient

AFARM literally in the bush is an unlikely location for a commercial kitchen producing handmade food to feature in traditional world recipes, but Lea Hine and Mark Warburton wouldn't prefer to be anywhere else.

Welcome to the Iron Pot Food Company on a remote 40-hectare farm 18 kilometres from Kyogle in the hills near the NSW-Queensland border.

Mark owns the farm, while Lea is in charge of the kitchen where she value-adds with Mark's honey and eggs and a lot of other native and locally sourced ingredients to come up with macadamia pestos, dry dip dukkah and Chai tea to pure unblended honey, and slices and biscuits to cater for dairy and gluten-free diets.

Sydney born and bred, Lea attributes a stressful 10 years working for the NSW Department of Health in HIV community counselling to where she finds herself today. To relieve stress, Lea would head for the country and stay for a while with anyone she knew living on a rural property.

That took her to the South Coast, the Central West, North Coast and as far north as Townsville, Queensland, but the beauty of the North Coast drew her back and while at Murwillumbah for a year, Lea decided she really could live in the region but would need to do something.

So with no agricultural background, Lea enrolled in a diploma of agribusiness certificate at TAFE's Wollongbar college which exposed her to weekly visits to properties where she met some amazing people with successful backyard interests.

"Those Wednesday afternoon visits inspired me," Lea said.

"Mark was selling eggs and honey at the farm gate and we had a healthy vegetable garden with basil and parsley that I used in pestos I've always made.

"With a summer surplus, I added macadamias to the pestos for our own table and then a friend who was impressed with it said I should sell it."

So Lea headed into Kyogle town to a fruit shop but the owner said he didn't like macadamias. Her friendly adviser requested some of the product to go with her own creations for the Lismore Herb Festival's Hot and Spicy Ball.

"My friend told me it walked off the table," Lea said.

"I went back to the Kyogle fruit shop



By KEVIN ELSLEY

with that evidence and the owner agreed to give it a go."

The rest is history. Lea's range of food products can now be found in Victoria, South Australia, as far north as Townsville and along the NSW coast. She has a toe-hold in the Brisbane gourmet foods market and her gluten-free gingerbread biscuits and gluten and dairy-free honey and macadamia slices are exclusive to her business.

All products are made to order and now there's a commercial kitchen, Lea and Mark will be growing more of their own ingredients to supplement their pestos.

Because the retail business is so busy they don't have time to patronise farmers and community markets but don't miss regional food festivals.

Lea and Mark have help from a Kyogle High School trainee in food processing, with a teacher from Grafton TAFE visiting one day every five weeks for her on-site tuition.

Then there's Mark's parents who pitch in with packaging and labelling, and any sibling visiting.

"Being a family-based business, it has grown because of that support," Lea said.

Freight and transport costs, power failures and no broadband facilities are among the challenges but they are out-weighed by the positives.

"Running a business from home means delineating between what's work and what's not but we have set clear goals



Lea Hine with products from the Iron Pot Food Company, which she runs with Mark Warburton on a 40-hectare farm 18 kilometres from Kyogle.

about having time off and how to manage growth.

"We work in a fantastic environment with a view of the bush from the office and when we stop work we are already at home – no commuting," Lea said.

"I don't miss Sydney and when I go to Brisbane fortnightly I get my dose of city life then. As a lifestyle I consider myself

extremely lucky here."

The company's unusual name is taken from where the business started – at Toonumbar Dam on Iron Pot Creek not far away, where Lea and Mark hired out a kitchen before they built their own.

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