



## Relish for rhubarb

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It takes drive and enthusiasm to create a successful gourmet food brand, and Lana Campbell has double serves of both. Greg Clarke reports Paint yourself a picture based on the following: A single mum with a young baby and limited funds; a vegie garden of four square metres; plants in various stages of questionable health – sunburnt tomatoes, struggling chillies and listless beetroot.

Consider plenty of sunshine in the picture, as mum and baby are healthy and there are two thriving, vitally important, rhubarb plants in that garden-shed-sized patch.

Lana Campbell is infectiously tough and ambitious. She was living in a small cottage in Nullawarre, about 45km southeast of Warrnambool, when surveying the 2007 scenario outlined above.

For Lana, then 31, the personal landscape was perfect, not to paint, but somewhat incredibly, to start a business.

Lana has been producing rhubarb preserves under her Lana's Garden brand for 10 years. From her base in Warrnambool, she makes jams, relishes and rhubarb vinegar.

There isn't an artificial colour, flavour or preservative hidden anywhere on her jars' nutritional panels. Lana has seven products, supplies some 80 stores directly in Victoria, and works with a distributor in South Australia.

"My original plan was to make products from red vegetables," Lana says. "I was going to register Red's Fine Foods as a business but my tomatoes would get burnt by the sun and when the soldier beetles moved in I had a bad year with chillies." Nothing ever bothered her rhubarb plants.

"Snails and soldier beetles didn't bother it and it didn't appear to really have a season," she says. "It grew all year round." With no reserve funds, Lana decided to concentrate her business on the redoubtable rhubarb. It was a way to limit financial risk because, for the infant business to work, the produce had to come from her garden.

The new mum was also in possession of a family secret: grandma's recipe for the rhubarb relish Lana had eaten growing up on a dairy farm at Naringal, 15km away.

"I knew it was brilliant and remember it on brown bread with ham when I was about eight," she says. In her late teens Lana's friends had loved it too – bacon and eggs garnished with rhubarb relish seemed to go a treat after a night out in Warrnambool.

CONTINUED PAGE 30 FROM PAGE 29 "And older people liked it – they knew relish," she says. "They had eaten it before tomato sauce from a supermarket somehow came to replace it." Before having her first child, Zoe, Lana had worked as a cook and knew she had skills balancing flavours. She tweaked grandma's recipe. She also wanted to create a sweet product.

"Rhubarb is normally teamed with strawberries so I thought I'd do a rhubarb and raspberry jam," she says. "I needed a point of difference." Business progress was slow. Quality ruled over expediency, but there were other reasons Lana didn't rush to market. She moved to a dairy farm nearby, at Nirranda, after meeting then

partner Allistair. She dug up her original rhubarb crowns and moved them too. The family grew along with her business plans. Zoe gained two brothers, Alex and Darcey.

At Nirranda, Lana planted 200 rhubarb crowns to complement those first plants transplanted from Nullawarre.

In 2004, with a young family and still short of cash, Lana took a part-time job at Timboon Fine Ice-cream. The owners, Tim Marwood and Caroline Simmons, employed her and also shared business tips and strategies.

"They were amazing," Lana says. "They gave me so much insight into how to run a business and how to manufacture a product." As well as running their ice-cream business, Tim and Caroline started a restaurant and distillery at Timboon, where they sold gourmet foods, many from southwest Victoria.

Money was still tight in 2008 when Lana ordered her first jars – a whopping 75. "It seemed a huge order," she says. "Tim was lovely enough to say whatever you make we will put on the shelf." Tim and Caroline bought all of Lana's first product lines. "I used the distillery and its good name to get leverage to sell into other stores," Lana says.

Later she dabbled in her first farmers' market. She took 100 jars to a market in Simpson. "I had no idea how many jars I was going to sell but I sold out," she says.

A jar of produce then was \$6.50. Sometimes at markets her young boys were on either hip. In 2016, Lana helped found The Fresh Market Warrnambool, which runs on the first and third Sunday of each month. She is still involved today and has recently introduced a buy-back scheme for her used jars. Those who return empty Lana's Garden jars are paid 30 cents for each jar or bottle.

Lana conceived her business as a way to stay at home with Zoe. After the two boys were born she still thought she'd be able to at least give working children-friendly hours a go. Not surprisingly she ended up working far more hours than she planned.

The kitchen in Lana's house is registered as commercial. Zoe, Darcey and Alex may have grown up with pots of rhubarb simmering on the stove but the business has grown such that it's not just one mum in the kitchen. Lana employs other mums to help her cook.

Lana can no longer produce enough rhubarb from her own garden. There just isn't time to grow it all and cook. While she maintains about 1000 plants, she buys about 100kg a week from a spray-free market garden. After cooking up her magic, Lana now produces more than 10,000 jars a year.

Lana's product name may be rated highly but she's learnt not to rely just on taste to sell her business. Labelling has proved crucial.

"I know now people use sight to judge," she says. Parts of the Lana's Garden label have been trademarked.

Lana is still growing her business and plans to build a separate commercial kitchen out the back of the Warrnambool house where she and the three children now live. It will be something of a relief, but for this seemingly indefatigable business woman the expansion isn't limited to a shiny new workplace.

Lana has an online shop and is working with distributors in other states and investigating opportunities in New Zealand and China. "I've plans to include 'exporter' on my gravestone," she says.

Farm facts LANA'S GARDEN Lana Campbell is the grower, cook and business brain behind Lana's Garden, a gourmet range of rhubarb preserves, including relishes, jams and vinegar.

Lana cooks all the products, with part-time help from other local mums, at her commercial kitchen in her Warrnambool home.

She grows 1000 rhubarb plants herself and buys 100kg a week from a spray-free market gardener.

Lana's Garden produces more than 10,000 jars of preserve a year, sold across Victoria and South Australia.

Export is Lana's next major goal.

lanasgarden.com

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