

MEET THE MAKER

The sweet science behind Albany's Bush Honey

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, WAYNE HARRINGTON speaks to Bush Honey's Atti and Janine Bush about their blooming local enterprise.



Wayne Harrington: Atti, I'll start with you first and ask you to tell us about your farming and agricultural background.

Atti Bush: I grew up in Northwest Scotland and we lived on a small holding – a croft. We kept sheep and cows. We also had a couple of beehives at one point because my grandfather was a beekeeper in the south of England.

WH: When did you first come to Australia?

AB: It must have been in 1979. I was nine years old when we came out for a year because I was asthmatic and my father was coming over to visit his brother. And they thought it would be interesting to see whether my medical condition improved in Australia. I certainly enjoyed it here. I made up my mind as a nine-year-old that this was where I was going to live? It was too cold in Scotland for me.

WH: You get cold just thinking about a croft in Scotland.

AB: Yes, it's cold. The houses aren't warm there. My mother's Swedish and they have got much colder windier winters but the conditions of living in

Sweden in the winter is much, much better than in Scotland where they have stone buildings that they keep modifying and they keep on being damp and cold.

WH: So when you came out permanently, what brought you here?

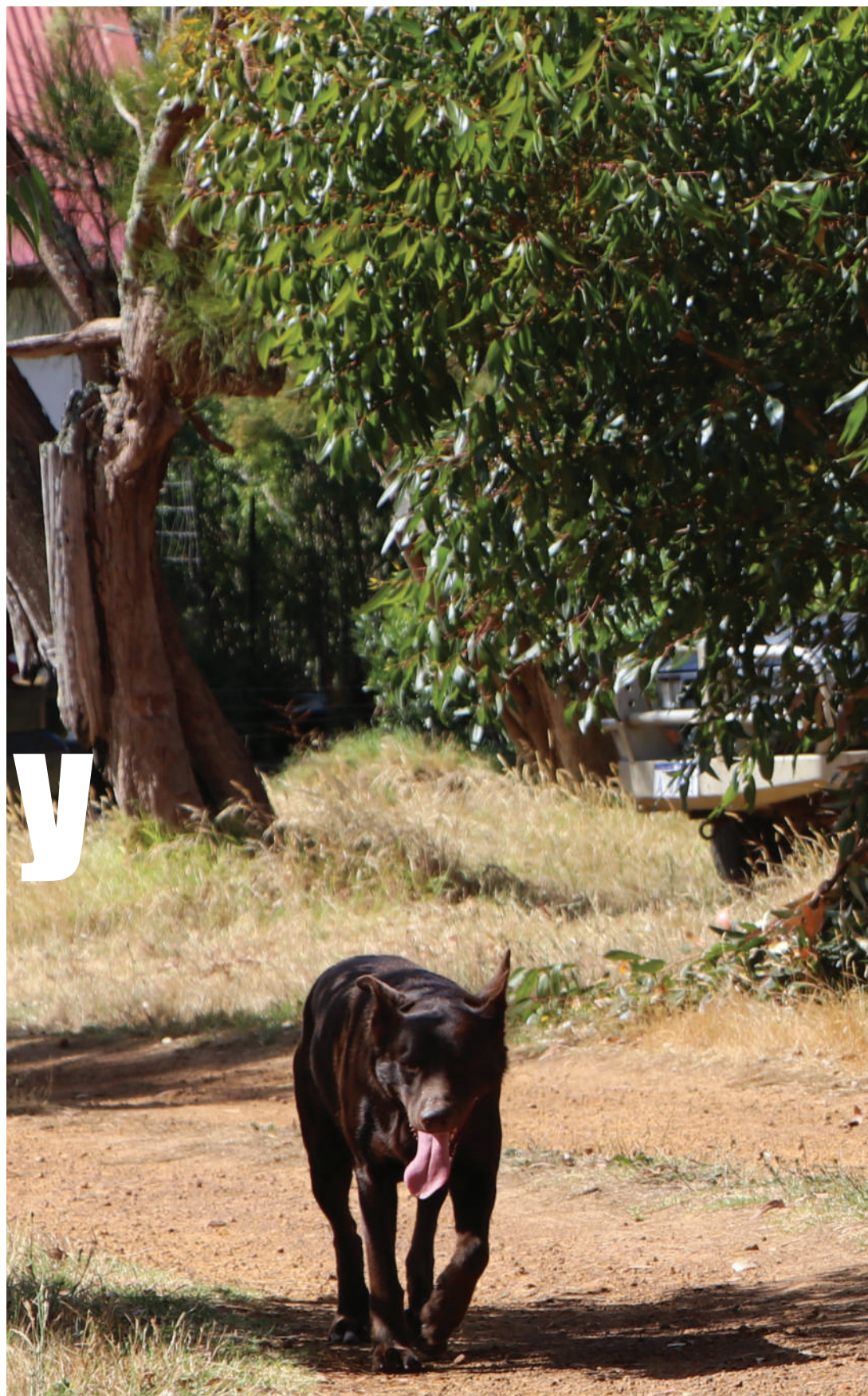
AB: My dad had bought land over in Tasmania. I didn't really want to live in Tasmania. I wanted to live in WA. So I worked for my uncle on a farm near Mount Barker and quickly realised that farm work was fairly boring. But I did notice that the shearers were paid a lot more than the farm workers. And they got to go to a different farm every week so I thought that might be what I wanted to do. I got booked into a shearing school and that kind of got the ball going and I managed to get a job.

WH: Which shearing school did you go to?

AB: There was a school being run at Pardelup Prison Farm.

WH: What did you have to do wrong to get on the course there?

AB: No, I didn't have to break a law! What actually happened was my



aunt had sons about my age and she realised I wasn't going to enrol myself because I was always busy doing more frivolous things, so she enrolled me and told me to sign the form. I had an unregistered motorbike that I used to ride out to Pardelup. Nobody caught me, so I didn't end up having to stay there.

WH: How many years were you shearing for?

AB: Thirty-odd years until I was at least 50. I went part-time from then on. Now I'm 63. So I'm kind of saying no more to that. It's too painful.

WH: Janine, how about you? Where did you grow up?

JB: I grew up in Perth, but it was a

country town then. I had horses and we lived by the beach.

WH: How did you meet this shearer?

JB: I moved down here with my oldest daughter and we were looking for a rental and somebody to rent with. Someone had told me about this bloke who had a house and I rang him up and moved in. He was meant to be leaving, but he never left.

WH: What led you to move into the honey industry?

AB: That was an accident. We homeschooled our kids and my youngest son hated homeschooling. I had imagined he wasn't very bright but he's actually, I think, a genius. I worked out later that it was probably





■ Janine and Atti Bush have developed new products to add to their ever-changing range under the Bush Honey label.

me who wasn't very bright. But I thought beekeeping is a hands-on thing and he's a very intuitive person and he's good with animals. I thought this might be for him. So I got a couple of beehives and started struggling to work it out. And he was helping me but after a few stinging episodes, he started to lose interest and I started to gain interest. So one day, I said to

Janine I was thinking of getting bigger and buying more beehives. And she said, "Well, we can't afford to", and I said, "We can't afford not to because if my back goes or for some reason and I can't shear we're left with no income. And I need to start transitioning into another income". So that was the first time I reckon that I've ever stood up

against her. She reckons that's not true, but either way...

WH: Either way, the transition was made. At that stage your operation was mainly wholesale, so what happened next?

JB: We were offered a spot at the Albany Farmers Markets, and that's

where I came in.

WH: Atti, you were very comfortable with this decision to go all-in?

AB: Yes, and I think it was in the back of my mind all the time. I had a great mentor, Kerry Faulkner from Mount Barker. He's mentored a lot of beekeepers and had been a beekeeper for I don't know how many years. He's got an incredible knowledge, and so I rang him up once and he said to me, "Ring up anytime you want, my boy". So I knew there was a future there. I mean, there's a million businesses and jobs out there that you can make money at, but the missing link was me. And if I can't make it work, then it won't work. So I didn't get too carried away. But I don't like selling honey. I don't like selling anything. Janine said to me, "I can sell all the honey you can produce", which sort of wasn't quite true, but it's good enough because she's done really well. We've got a pretty good foot in the door and we've got a good name.

WH: And your honey is now found in all sorts of places in Albany?

JB: We had a few shops come on board like Handasydes who were the first shop to take us in. Then we got into Mario's and then into The Goodlife where I work and a few other shops. And then I got the bright idea to make sticky chai.

WH: How did that come up?

JB: I have a favourite tea company in Perth and I rang them and said, "I love your tea. Do you want to use our honey?" but they said no. I thought if we had our honey in a tea we could sell it at the Markets, so they said they could just make up batches for us with our honey. I thought we would just try it and see what comes of it. And now we've got it in Handasydes, Bredco, The Goodlife, Stams and Gourmandise.

AB: What flavour properties does it have? How would you describe it?

JB: It's got ginger and pepper and cinnamon, so the medicinal part of it comes out. When I had COVID it just made me feel better. I was surprised. And I've had other people come and say they had the same anecdotal evidence as well.

WH: So you started off with only a few hives, but how many do you have now?

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AB: There's 140 in various apiaries. If things aren't good, we'll have more apiaries and spread them around. If the yate is going really well we might only have them on two apiaries quite close to each other. I used to put them in the tagasaste in the spring, near canola and I'd have the whole lot in one apiary. But it depends on the season. And just at the moment we've just got one out at Green Range.

WH: Amongst what sort of trees?

AB: I think they're mainly be farm trees that they're foraging on now. Actually, they're ready to be moved but there is mallee around them and banksias. There's been a flow on of different mallees flowering there, so that has kept them going. There are also some bluegums, but it produces this mild mallee honey. Unlike a lot of mallees, it's got a more gentle flavour. Everyone's got their own favourites, but I thought that was quite good.

WH: So it's a fairly fluid sort of thing in that one year you don't always know what you're going to come up with?

AB: Yes, but our main varieties in the winter time is yate and it can sometimes be karri as well. Spring is tricky because it's very hard to get away from canola. Some people love it because they put it in their tea because it's almost like sugar.

WH: And canola is a very liquid honey straight out of the hive but it doesn't stay that way does it?

■ Janine and Atti Bush take great joy from working with their many bee hives.



AB: No, it coarsely crystallises. However, the pollen is extremely nutritious and the bees swarm very readily on it, so you can actually breed up your hives – split them and breed them up which, when things were going good, was what we did.

WH: And your bees have proven to

beneficial to the crops as well?

AB: The farmer that I've been keeping bees with out at Green Range is really worried about the varroa mites coming in. And there just isn't enough beekeepers to bring bees to his crops, especially if I go broke because the price of wholesale honey has crashed, or whatever. If that happens, he's very concerned because it's going to

impact his livelihood as well.

WH: I understand the wholesale price of honey is actually a big concern for you all at the moment.

AB: I'll be alright because I can keep doing the markets and I can find other employment. I'm a seed collector as well, so for me, it's probably not so much of a worry as it is for the farmers

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because they rely heavily, not just on my bees, but the feral bees that are found out in all the bush blocks around Australia.

WH: Do you do any orchard contracts?

AB: Not us in particular. We could have gone to Manjimup for an this avocado grower who's in a big way. A couple of beekeepers who I'm friends with went there and they did all right this year. They got paid and even got some honey off it. Where I get a lot of my enjoyment from my work is knowing about plants. I'd been a seed collector when I was young, but back then it wasn't focused on mines, it was focused on gardening. Mines pay a lot

of money now to get seed out of the Goldfields and that's been where I've been aiming to reduce my numbers of hives to keep the quality up. And also to be a spotter for other beekeepers so that they can tell me what's flowering in their area. And I can tell them what I'm seeing in other areas. Beekeepers don't look for flowers, they look for buds because by the time they flower, it's almost too late to move the bees. Just at the moment it's marri budding up, so we're excited that we may get a really good crop of marri.

WH: And some would argue that's the best honey you can get.

AB: Yes, it's one of the nicest. That and

karri would be the most famous in this area.

WH: A beekeeper from down here once said that it seemed that 18 months after a big rain event, you will have a big blossoming event.

AB: I haven't got it so well worked out but obviously there are climate and weather influences but on top of that there is also a pattern. If you haven't had a good bloom of marri for a while, you start looking out because you know it's going to come around soon. It's the same with karri. It's going to be at least four years between a good bloom, usually more. So we've had and we've had good mallee years for last four years, but this year, suddenly, it's holding back like crazy. But that's what I expected anyway.

WH: Is it easy to get frustrated by the unpredictable nature of nature?

AB: No, it doesn't frustrate me because I've always known that. I've been in farming all my life and we used to laugh at farmers all the time because they were never happy because it was always too much rain or rain at the wrong time or not enough rain. So I sort of know what to expect.

WH: Does the unexpected sometimes come about in a good way?

AB: I remember saying when I started beekeeping that there's nothing

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better than when you think you're in the middle of a dearth and you go out and inspect your hives and there's just nectar flooding into the hive. You go, "Oh wow, this is alright!" So obviously, the other way around is not so good, but yes I try and focus on the good ones.

WH: It seems to me that there's a real collegial nature amongst beekeepers in this handing down of what is fairly ancient knowledge. Is that the way you see it in Albany?

AB: It's something that we've tried to maintain. There's a network of beekeepers in Albany who have actually all been encouraged by Kerry Faulkner. We will ring each other up and are happy to give away general information about what we're seeing in our areas. We've been able to encourage and help one another a lot. Having said that, I don't think you can say all beekeepers are like that because you get the Lone Rangers who won't say a thing to anybody. And if it's going good, they keep it secret. And they have to do a lot of traveling because they've got to find everything out for themselves because they don't trust anybody in the process. That's not me, though. The price of diesel is going up all the time, so I want to be in a cooperative of people who trust one another. We have a code of honour where we don't pinch each other's sites. But sometimes we allow each other to use our sites. And that either builds trust or total distrust, depending on what the outcome is.

WH: Are the outcomes always good?

AB: I've had people who I've helped and then they've tried to pinch the site or they've refused to move their bees off it. And then I have a friend who says "If you want my bees off, ring me up and I'll have them off in 24 hours". And I believe he would have done that. Ever since then he's trusted me and I've trusted him. And that's fantastic because I've been able to learn so much because I'm only a latecomer really.

WH: As it stands right now, what products do you have for this weekend at the Farmers Markets?

AB: We've got the Mild Mallee coming through, a little bit of Karri, The Creamed Honey just sells out too quickly, so there's none of that. And



■ Atti Bush moves his hives around farms and bushland all over the region.

we've got the tea.

WH: Given one choice of any honey that you've produced over time, what would be and how would you serve it?

AB: I've got two. The Blackbutt which we never produce and the Red Gum Marri. I would have a piece of brie, warm up the honey, toast some walnuts, put them on top, drizzle on some honey and then you bake it.

WH: That is a great answer. And what about you, Atti?

AB: Well, I've become gluten-intolerant. But when I wasn't, it was toast and tons of butter. And I like the honey not to be too runny. If it's just thick you can load it up onto the bread with the butter and get it into your mouth before it all starts dripping out onto the floor.

WH: What variety of honey?

AB: I love the mallee. We had one called Chittick which is an orange lambertia. I think that was my favourite.

It's one of the flowers of the mallee but it's only happened for me once when the rest of the mallee wasn't working. But the Chittick was just plodding through the year and I really loved it. It was a strong flavour. My daughter didn't like it but I thought it was just the best.

WH: It's been said that some people come to love their bees and they come to identify a kind of a personality to them. Is that your experience?

AB: I don't get too personal with them, I must say, but I've come to realise that they don't love me. However, they need me. They need me to move them otherwise, it'd be a big starvation thing happening for them.

WH: So there's a mutual tolerance thing going on amongst you all?

AB: Maybe. I think the bees are happiest when left on their own and left to their own devices. However, I don't like seeing what people do when they neglect their bees. It's not a pretty

sight. That's awful. There's no need for it.

WH: What does what does a really good day look like for you?

AB: I think back to a time when the canola was finished and I was looking for a site put my bees. I went down to my mallee spot and it was warm, there was no wind, there was still moisture in the air and the Chittick flowers were full of nectar. I always look for those conditions in that time of year. However, I've seen times when it's 35 degrees and all the mallee is flowering and it's just gushing into the hives and you can work the hives without gloves. The bees going hard to fill up their hives with honey.

WH: That must be an amazing thing to witness?

AB: Yes it is because you can pick up a frame and they're beginning to fill up. You lift it up, give it a shake and it just splashes out wet nectar all over the place. You know you've got some work ahead of you and you've got some money coming in. A friend of mine says in the yates in the winter you'll hear the lorikeets squawking and carrying on. He calls them the money birds because what they're doing – they're excited because they're finding the nectar in the flowers. I don't know, but it's one of the signs you look for if you're looking for honey flow. You might hear it in the karris as well.

WH: A slightly left-field question: Flow hives. Good, bad or indifferent?

AB: It depends where you are and who you are. They're very expensive. I don't like knocking inventions because some people swear by them, but as a commercial beekeeper, I wouldn't even entertain the thought for a second. I think they're fun and they're a novelty. And we've got friends who have one and they're excited. It depends on what floats your boat.

WH: Is it accurate to say that they work but only to a point?

AB: Well, if you're a farmer and you've got canola growing around you then it would be a big mistake to get a flow hive, because you probably have to keep it open all the time to get the canola out of it before it hardens in the night. I think if you lived in Perth, or Brisbane or somewhere where the ambient temperature is constantly hotter, it's going to work better than if

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■ Janine Bush is a familiar face at the Albany Farmers Markets.

you're down in Albany or Tasmania. You've got to have good bees in there to have a good colony to make it work. And I feel like if you're a really good beekeeper, you could probably make it work really well. But if you're a hobbyist, you might be better to start off with just the ordinary hive.

WH: Janine, dealing as you do with the public every weekend, it must be nice to have loyal repeat customers coming back?

JB: Yes, we have lots of them and we get a lot of positive feedback.

WH: What is the biggest concern for you right now? The falling wholesale price of honey or the prospect of the varroa mite coming to WA?

AB: The varroa mite is a much bigger and more permanent threat to the beekeeping industry than the price. The price will eventually come back up again. If not this year, within the next 10 years. It'll come back up again because people will drop out and the demand will come up. I just know that I'm 63 and that the idea of waiting 10 years for it to rebound doesn't really appeal to me very much. **S**

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