

MEET THE MAKER

Relishes in ready supply

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine spoke to Malcolm Traill and Heather Marr – the names behind Summer House Supplies which produces an amazing range of relishes, sauces and jams from a quaint, country-style commercial kitchen beside their home at Lowlands.

Southerly Magazine: So somebody came over for morning tea and said "Wow, you guys should make this commercially and sell it at the Farmers Market."?

Malcolm Traill: This started because we ran a restaurant when we first came to this part of the world, which was called "Emily's Country Kitchen". As part of the cooking there, we made jams and preserves to go with the meals. Then the markets started and I think we saw an opportunity to put those things out. The markets started in 2002 and I think we were almost originals.

Heather Marr: Prior to that we'd lived in the UK during the Thatcher years in the 1980s, so to help eke out our meagre incomes we used to cook jams. We had a friend who lived in Kent near this amazing pick-your-own farm – a massive soft-fruit farm – and we'd go down there and buy fruit. And we'd go "blackberrying" along the laneways in the wonderful English tradition of foraging. With the weather in London, it was actually pleasant to be in the kitchen, so when we returned from the UK we brought back a huge jam pot and a lot of the other equipment. When we started working in the restaurant, we used to sell some of the jams and we made the chutney that went with the Ploughman's lunch. So yes, people said "you should perhaps do this a bit more".

SM: Looking through some of the products that you have, and there's a good many of them, where do you source all your fruit from?

MT: To be in the Albany Farmers Market, the majority of the produce has to be local, so it's all grown locally around the Great Southern. The

majority of the fruit and vegies that we get come from people who are actually in the Farmers Market.

HM: Ever since we began, we've bought soft fruit from Sheila and Phillip Marshall at Torbay Asparagus and Howard and Bev Shaplin and the Feltons. Our stone fruit come from Red Gum Hill up at Mount Barker. We also do a lot of swapping of citrus and those sorts of things when people have a glut, which is great because it's all local and it keeps our costs down.

SM: Presumably your products change with the different seasons?

MT: At the moment we're getting towards the end of the summer produce, but we try and keep things going through the year so we freeze some fruit and vegies. We've actually discovered that frozen fruit makes better jam for some reason, so we're happy to fill up freezers and help keep our products going right throughout the year.

SM: Are there any quirky ingredients that take a bit of sourcing?

MT: We've branched out into pickles a bit more than we used to because I think the trend is with cooking shows and international influences there are more Asian influences, so we're doing things like kasundi. We're using spices more than we were. We've been doing this for 17 years and tastes change. The temptation is to have too many products which makes it difficult for people to choose.

HM: The seasonality also pushes us to be a bit creative or to look for recipes for things like chutney that don't require seasonal ingredients, or seasonally unavailable ingredients. We now do something called East India Chutney,

Pictures: Wayne Harrington



which is actually a really, really old recipe based on apples and dried fruit, so you don't need tomatoes. It's been quite a popular preserve.

SM: Do you think you'll continue to experiment based on changing tastes?

MT: There's not a lot of point in making something really exotic and then having it sit in the cupboard for a year, so you've sort of got to go with what the market wants. Some people might like it but convincing other people that it's really nice is sometimes a bit difficult, so from that point of view we tend to stick to the more recognised ones. The other benefit of the market is that people can actually taste things before they buy, so that's a plus. We don't make too much to start with. If it doesn't sell we eat it ourselves.

MT: Last winter we started making a range of soups – and again not huge quantities – but we would do

slightly interesting things like beetroot and apple soup, orange and carrot soup, plus big vegetable soups and Tuscan bean soups. And of course pumpkin soup because there's plenty of pumpkins in the market. People who were willing to give that a go, will buy, because they're really delicious. We've got a small but steady market for that sort of thing.

SM: Does that also help level out seasonality?

MT: Yes because then we're making use of vegetables, particularly, that are available in winter. One of the great things, though, about the Farmers Market and about the South Coast generally is that our growing seasons are actually quite extensive. Things like carrots and beetroot grow readily for much of the year, and people like the Bathgates have a really great range of different vegetables coming through.



■ Heather Marr and Malcolm Traill enjoy the companionable nature of the Summer House Supplies kitchen beside their Lowlands home.

bubbling away on the stove; it's a maximum of about three kilos of fruit. The bigger you get, the more chance you have of losing the quality control. And we don't use preservatives. We haven't thought about it too much, but we do get occasional approaches.

HM: But one of the great things about the Farmers Market for instance is that you've got a very personal relationship with your customers. We can get the pats on the back and the compliments, which is always wonderful, but if something's not quite right, or people care enough to make a suggestion, we can actually listen and discuss that with them. By going much bigger I think we'd probably lose a lot of that contact. We also have lives outside the kitchen, so it's also working out what we do with our other occupations and how we slot the Summer House business into that.

SM: Tell us about those other jobs you do.

HM: I'm a registered migration agent, which means that I assist people in applying for visas to come to Australia.

MT: And I've got four jobs basically as a historian and an academic. I teach at UWA and work at the Museum doing Albany history. In a way we see Summer House as serious but also as a bit of fun on the side. It's a very sociable thing to do as well.

SM: The other thing that perhaps defines what you do and how much you do is your commercial kitchen?

MT: Yes, it's a small commercial kitchen limited to just two stoves and not very large pots and freezers for fruit. We're limited to the amounts that we can produce and store. So from that point of view it's a really small operation. The kitchen doubles as an office too, so that limits the space as well. It's unusual because it's actually a straw-bale kitchen. The summer house itself was actually a summer school project through the Albany Summer School. They put the basics up and then we finished it off. It took a few years, but it's a really nice space to work in and is also very well insulated. It started life literally as a summer house but we soon realised that the weather around Albany wasn't that conducive to sitting around and drinking cocktails in almost the open air. So then we drew several variations as to what it could be and we hit on the fact that it's good for a kitchen. That's

SM: Do you sell elsewhere through retail outlets?

MT: We supply some accommodation places around town and Gourmandise. We haven't ventured into Perth markets. That's the next level up really; we're a micro-business.

HM: We've also started selling on Sundays through the Good Food Shed at Bornholm. It's a small market but is really interesting. It is a highly seasonal market because it will normally close in about late May or early June for the winter period and then re-open in spring.

SM: And you're happy to stay at this level? Over these 17 years you must've thought about going the next step?

MT: It's partly a control thing about quality because we don't cook a huge amount at a time. We don't have the six or 10 kilos



how that came about basically. The question is also fitting people in there. If you get an extra person in there, you're tripping over each other so it's a maximum of about two.

HM: And the great thing is this is a home business and one of the really enjoyable things about this is that Malcolm and I cook together often on a Friday, getting ready for the markets. We're working together. We can sit down and have a proper smoko, a good cup of coffee and croissant. It's a very companionable process and great to be working with another person. I think if we got too much bigger we'd lose that, and also the employee-employer relationship is a different one anyway. We've been really lucky; we've had some young people locally who've worked with us, and they've been fabulous, but it's also great working

together, just the two of us.

SM: So what do you talk about, when you're in there busily working away? Fruit and sugar levels or life, love and the universe?

HM: All of the above.

MT: Well you don't want to get too distracted because otherwise you forget to put the sugar in or something disastrous. Often we've got a couple of things we're cooking at the same time. Heather's working on one and I'm jarring the other, so from that point of view you've got to keep your mind on the job, but it's an opportunity to talk to each other or listen to podcasts, or whatever we do. It's a good chance to catch up for the week and work out where we're going next, and what else needs to be done. It's not huge but it's fun. We wouldn't have been doing it for 17 years if it wasn't fun. We did retire from the markets for four years because every Saturday morning was a bit of a chore. Then we realised we were going into the markets anyway to do our shopping and have a coffee, so we may as well go in and make some money. We're now at the market every second week, so from that point of view that was a bit of a compromise.

HM: We have a product that's discretionary. People want vegetables every week, but something like jam is an extra on a household budget. Even though our jam is fabulous, it does take a while to get through our jars, so we have a roughly two-week cycle for when people make purchases. **S**

