

COVER STORY

# Gold in them hills

Sun and laidback lifestyles attracted people to the hamlets around Byron Bay. But the sea change also spawned many successful cottage industries, writes Greg Stolz

**A**BOUT 15 years ago, in the verdant hills behind Byron Bay, John and June Zentveld and Martin and Pam Brook were planting their first coffee and macadamia nut trees respectively; Maggi Miles was baking macadamia nut cookies in her farmhouse oven and John and Lynne Boland were whipping up fresh chilli salsa to dollop on the tacos and burritos they sold at the Byron markets.

They didn't know it at the time but they were sowing the seeds for what is today a thriving Byron Bay-based and branded food industry.

It might not quite rival tourism as Byron's biggest money-spinner but it's getting up there: Miles' Byron Bay Cookie Company, for example, expects to turn over around \$10 million this year. But it wasn't the prospect of big bucks that lured the major players into Byron's now abundant food bowl in the 1980s, it was the lifestyle. The chance to live in one of Australia's most idyllic locations, and make a dollar while they were at it, is a common thread running through the stories of most of these passionate producers.

John and Lynne Boland, who claim to be the first producers to slap the brand "Byron Bay" on their products, are a classic case-in-point.

John, a plumber from Chicago, and Lynne, a children's camp cook, came Down Under in the mid 1980s to visit John's grandmother in Melbourne. On a relative's recommendation, the couple took a drive up to Byron Bay.

"That was it, we were gone," John recalls with a grin and a still noticeable American twang. "We fell in love with the place and decided to settle here."

The Bolands bought a hilltop property at Goonengerry, between Byron Bay and



Mullumbimby and, while admiring the ocean views, looked around for a way to earn a living.

"Byron was a lot different then and you pretty much had to create your own work," John says.

Big fans of Mexican food, the Bolands bought an old taco van and began selling tacos, burritos and nachos at the local markets. Their jalapeno chilli bushes were thriving in the red volcanic soil (with a bit of help from compost from the local piggery), so they began experimenting with their own salsas to serve with the Mexican fare.

Word of their deliciously spicy salsa picante and salsa verde spread and requests poured in for bottles. The Byron Bay Chilli Co. was born and the Bolands were soon supplying local gourmet delis.

It wasn't long before they landed the coup of having their distinctively labelled products sold in David Jones, Woolworths and Coles.



Today, the company's range — which includes salsas, gourmet chilli sauces and corn chips — is sold in supermarkets, delis and health food stores throughout Australia and exported to the US and UK.

Through trial and error in the kitchen of their humble timber home, the Bolands are continually developing new and exotic chilli concoctions which have won a string of national and international awards such as the annual Australian Fiery Foods Challenge.

Such is the demand for their products that the Bolands can no longer grow enough chillies to keep pace, and source most of their produce from a grower in Bundaberg. While they used to bottle up to 500 jars of salsa a night on their own, the size of the demand means they also now have to outsource their production and packaging.

"Lynne is the brains behind the operation and I am the taste-tester," John jokes. "I don't really know what life would be like without a good chilli sauce or salsa. I can't think of too many foods that aren't improved by them."

**L**IKE the Bolands, Martin and Pam Brook also were looking for a sea change when they came to Byron Bay in the late 1980s.

Pam was a Melbourne dentist, husband Martin a film producer, when they bought a rundown former dairy farm at St Helena, just outside Byron, in 1988, with the aim of one day starting a food business.

"Being from Melbourne, we were big foodies from way back and wanted to get into the business," Pam says. "But we had to wait until the farm was commercially viable."

Over 10 years they progressively established a 4500-tree macadamia nut plantation on the property, and then, in 1999, they were ready to move to the region. They were intent on value-adding, rather than just exporting raw nuts.

After an ill-fated flirtation with macadamia mayonnaise ("we just couldn't get it stable without adding

preservatives and additives," Pam says) the couple launched their now highly successful range of Brookfarm macadamia nut muesli: toasted, natural and gluten-free.

"My father was a pioneer of the Victorian ski industry and he always used to make his own muesli," Pam says.

"We grew up always eating good breakfasts so we modified the family recipe using macadamia nuts from the farm and other all-Australian ingredients."

Other Brookfarm products followed — cold-pressed macadamia nut oils (natural and infused with lemon myrtle and lime and chilli) and roasted and sea-salted macadamia nuts (natural or with bush pepper spice or Kashmiri chilli).

Brookfarm's smartly packaged products are now sold through David Jones and in upmarket overseas department stores Harvey Nichols (UK) and Dean and DeLuca (USA). The tasty muesli is served to passengers on Virgin Blue aircraft and

Cunard Line ships and also helped energise the crew aboard the maxi-yacht Skandia in last year's Sydney-Hobart race.

Brookfarm's oils are being used by an increasing number of leading chefs, including Steve Snow from the award-winning Fins at Byron Bay.

"We travel to a lot of international fine food shows and every time we're away, we meet new distributors, find new markets and our orders increase," Pam says. Their products also have won many awards at events including the prestigious Great Taste Awards, run by the British Guild of Fine Food Retailers.

**A**NOTHER to move from the US was Maggi Miles, who spent many years working in the fashion industry.

With her partner, Gary Lines, she moved to Byron from New York in the late 1980s looking for a career and lifestyle change.

A handy cook, Maggi began baking

macadamia nut cookies in her old farmhouse oven, at Federal near Byron, to sell at the local markets under the name Pickles, Pies and Petticoats.

Local cafes began stocking the biscuits, their fame spread and department store Myer placed its first order. Today, Pickles, Pies and Petticoats has become the Byron Bay Cookie Company and the old farmhouse oven has made way for a large, state-of-the-art bakehouse in the Byron Industrial Estate, employing almost 100 people.

The products are supplied to David Jones, Qantas, Virgin Blue and Harvey Nichols and Selfridges in the UK, as well as to cafes and delis throughout Australia and department stores in Singapore and Ireland.

Maggi's original white choc chunk and macadamia cookie and the triple choc fudge are still the company's top-sellers. A range of savoury breadsticks, crispbread and flat bread, and gluten-free cookies are new additions, while in keep-

ing with Byron's "clean and green" image, bio-degradable plastic packaging has been introduced.

**J**OHN and June Zentveld were growing avocados at Newrybar, behind Byron, in the mid 1980s when footrot disease struck.

In a stroke of good timing, the NSW Department of Agriculture was about to start coffee trials and the Zentvelds took the plunge and became the area's first commercial growers, buying a special Queensland-made harvester to cut production costs so the operation could compete with third-world producers.

Their son John Jr and daughter-in-law Rebecca established Zentveld's Coffee in 1993 with the aim of becoming a boutique "100 per cent Australian bean" roastery. As well as growing its own coffee, the company sources, roasts, blends and packages beans from about 25 local growers.

"The best coffee is usually grown in the cooler climates in the clouds of Kenya

or Colombia but because of our rich volcanic soil and good rainfall, we can replicate the ideal growing conditions here," Rebecca says.

"The beautiful red soil and our micro-climate really bring out the sweet, chocolatey flavour that we're looking for in the cup. We've developed a range of recipes, rather like the winemaker who wants an interesting blend."

Zentveld's is now processing around 40 tonnes a year and at this year's national coffee competition in Sydney, against almost 60 rival roasters, picked up six awards from seven entries.

Northern Rivers Regional Development Board director Ian Oelrichs says that in only a decade, northern NSW has gone from "a culinary wasteland to (a region) producing some of the finest and most unique food products in our country".

"It is the creativity of our people that is very clearly reflected in their products, including their passion for and connection to our succulent region," Oelrichs says.

DETAILS

**Zentveld's Coffee, 193 Broken Head Rd, Newrybar.**  
Ph: (02) 6687 2045  
[www.zentvelds.com.au](http://www.zentvelds.com.au)  
**Farm sales Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm (also chocolate-coated coffee beans and Brookfarm muesli).**  
**Brookfarm, St Helena.**  
Ph: (02) 6684 7790  
[www.brookfarm.com.au](http://www.brookfarm.com.au)  
**Byron Bay Cookie Company, 6 Brigantine St, Byron Industrial Estate.** Ph: (02) 6639 6300  
[www.cookie.com.au](http://www.cookie.com.au)  
**Factory-direct sales Mon-Fri 9am-5pm.**  
**Byron Bay Chilli Company, Lot 4 Mill Rd, Goonengerry.**  
Ph: (02) 6684 9248  
[www.byronbaychilli.com](http://www.byronbaychilli.com)

**HOMESTYLE . . .** *clockwise from top left*, Byron Bay Chilli Co. products; coffee grower Rebecca Zentveld; Byron Bay Cookie Company cookies and proprietor Maggi Miles; Brookfarm oils and owner Pam Brook; Zentveld's raw and packaged coffee; *far left*, John and Lynne Boland who started the Byron Bay Chilli Co.

Pictures: Adam Head

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