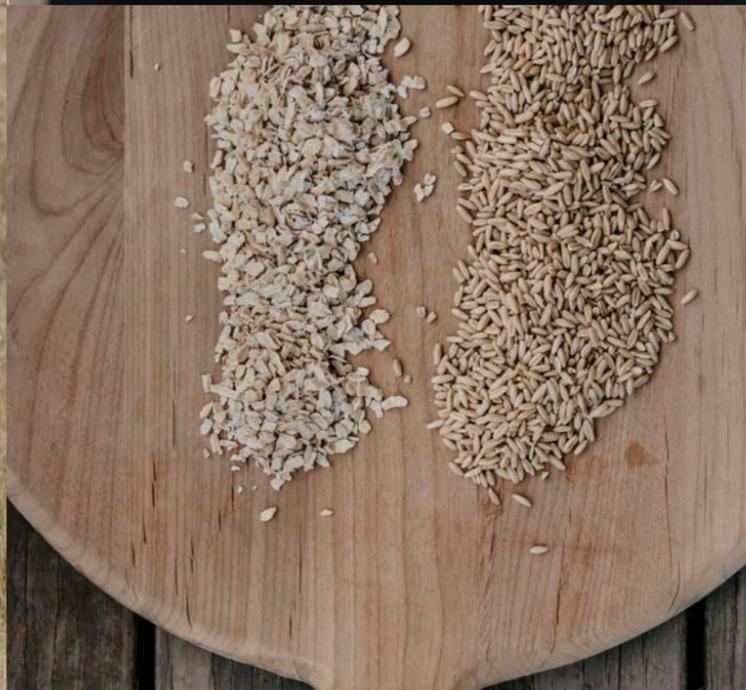


Forging new paths

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First generation farmer Kendra Kerrisk traded her white laboratory coat for a life on the land and she's never looked back. She walks Emily Herbert along her path, from self-taught olive grower to the pitfalls and emotional yields of sustainable farming.



THERE'S A STREAK of liquid gold curdling along the horizon as Kendra Kerrisk moves through her olive trees. The sun's dying light glances through the trees, throwing their spindly silhouettes into sharp relief. The drought's long fingers have the Riverina region in a tight grasp and even the hardy olive trees, their roots twisting back to arid Mediterranean climates, are struggling with the lack of rain. It's the farmers dance with the elements which remains one constant, in a life of what ifs when working the land. These spacious lines of trees are a long cooee from the labyrinth of university academia and laboratories, which was Kendra's whole existence just a few years ago.

The scientist was working as a researcher in her native New Zealand when she was offered the chance to lead a robotic milking research project at the University of Sydney. In early 2006 she and her husband Brent packed up and headed across the Tasman to Australia, toting their two-year-old son and his six-week old brother. Based in Camden for the project, they made a decision which would ripple through their lives. With family based in the area, they decided to buy a farm near Boree Creek and take on a share farmer. In 2014 they purchased another property, 'Pleasant Valley', which boasted a once award-winning, but now very neglected, olive plantation. "We didn't buy the farm for the grove but found ourselves in the position of having to decide whether to pull the trees out or do something with them," Kendra said. With 800 trees neatly cordoned within 12-acres, Kendra felt a pull to breathe life back into the operation. "After one too many wines one night, a girlfriend and I decided we'd be amazing at making olive oil, so Brushwoods was born."

While she wasn't born with red dirt in her veins, Kendra nursed sensibilities that would form the foundation of her farming ethos. "Working in the dairy industry and now making olive oil I'm very passionate about real food and ethical pricing of food – pricing that's fair to the consumer but recognises the true value of the production system; not \$1 a litre milk!" she said. "At the beginning we were still nearly five hours away in Camden and had full-time jobs. All work in the olive grove happened on weekends and school holidays." As the business continued to grow, Kendra took a leap of faith and pulled stops on her role as a researcher, moving to the farm permanently. The Kerrisks struck a three-year deal with a local picking and pruning crew who would supply the equipment, while the family supplied the labour, the teams going halves in the fruit. They pruned the trees, a mammoth task, taking 250 trailer loads out of the grove. "That's just what we had to do to try and get the trees back to one central trunk so the sunlight could get into the canopies," she said. "The grove was transformed but the impact on the trees was massively stressful."

Such an intensive process means yields are reduced but the flavour and aroma is completely uncompromised. "It



also means that our Extra Virgin olive oil is treated like a seasonal product - it isn't available all year so our customers are super excited to buy up large when it's beautiful and fresh," Kendra said. "You see, olive oil is not like a good wine; it doesn't get better with age." The 2015 harvest producing a measly 17 litres of oil. "All that hard work for not much!" Kendra laughed. "Nevertheless we entered it into the Golden Olive Awards and won a silver medal. More importantly, we tasted fresh olive oil and we were hooked. The following year we got 500 litres and a bronze medal at the Australian Olive Association Awards. In 2017 we had another 500 litres and the elusive gold medal at Sydney Royal Fine Food Show. Last year we brought in a tree shaker for harvest, netting a bumper crop of 1500 litres. We were super excited that we were awarded a silver medal at Sydney Royal; a good yield with no compromised quality. This year with such a severe drought our harvest will yield a maximum 150 litres. That's OK though - that's the reality of real food production."

It's been a rollercoaster of a journey. "When we started we didn't know a single thing. I'm a bit of a planner and I like to prepare for things but I couldn't start to build a customer base if I didn't know how much oil we were going to get," Kendra said. "I couldn't work out costs of production when I had no idea what volumes we would harvest and the list goes on. There was a lot of muddling, ordering small volumes of bottles and labels, because we simply didn't know what to expect." Never one to shy away from forging new ground, two years ago Kendra starting playing with produce ideas. With oil production limited, she decided to branch into rolled oats. "We decided to keep our oats fresh, not dried, to keep

with the 'real food' passion I'd developed. Normally oats are dried after rolling to halt the oxidation process and give them a good shelf life. We decided to vacuum seal them rather than dry them and the result is amazingly creamy, with a gorgeous natural sweetness. We're the only company in Australia, and perhaps even globally, selling fresh oats which is really something special." Kendra isn't the only one to delight in her oats; the product has just taken out the winning gong for the New South Wales Earth category at the 2019 delicious. Harvey Norman Produce Awards.

Critical to Kendra's success as a first-generation farmer is having a strict workday routine. "I work from home which I love! After all those years of going to work it's lovely to be the Boss Lady," she said. "My greatest ritual is getting up early as though I am going to work. When I get home from the school bus run at 7:45 I get straight into it and I don't stop until I put my Mum hat on again at 4:30 with another school bus run. Trying to grow the business really requires committed time, otherwise it's easy to get caught up in product prep and dispatching orders. I can't afford to work in the business without working on the business!" Kendra's strength is her focus. "I commit to putting in the hours without getting distracted by domestic duties," she said. "Often I'm away at markets on the weekend which I love but I do prefer to spend time with Brent and the boys. I love how food brings us together at set times of the day; we really are blessed to live the farming lifestyle."