

From little things, BIG things grow

Australia's coffee growing regions are thriving yet still fly under the radar. *BeanScene* speaks with Zeta Greally about bringing home-grown coffee to the forefront.



Zeta Greally started growing coffee in 1994 with the goal to produce some of the world's finest single origin coffees.

Zeta Greally describes herself as a “city slicker turned country farmer” with an eternal love for high heels.

When Zeta first stepped off the plane at Gold Coast Airport in 1994, she didn't quite know what to expect. She jumped in a car and drove 30 minutes into the Tweed Valley in northern New South Wales. On arrival at the mountain-top property, her first hurdle was how to open the barbed wire fence to her newly purchased block of land.

“I was in a little pink dress with heels. I knew I had arrived,” Zeta says. “I was used to living a city lifestyle, and here I was about to embark on a farming adventure, to which I had no experience. I was just a little bit terrified of what I'd gotten myself into.”

Zeta and her husband Marc moved to the Tweed Valley in need of a sea change after years jet setting around the world. Marc accidentally found the site when he became lost driving in the area. It had been for sale for some time but Zeta says the dusty gravel road deterred buyers.

Zeta grew up in Brisbane and worked as a nurse educator at a local hospital before moving to Hong Kong to pursue a career in medical publishing. Other opportunities arose, and eventually Zeta found herself working as an Account Director in the United Kingdom. Much to her good fortune, it gave her the flexibility to commute to Paris every few weeks.

“I would drink masses of coffee when I was working in Europe, even though the coffee was diabolical. I understood coffee and I appreciated a decent cup, but never for a second did I think I'd be growing the thing 10 years later,” Zeta says. “Once my daughter Meg was born, I wanted a career that allowed me to start my own business, but still gave me family time and flexibility.”

Marc, a pilot of many years with Qantas



Wirui Estate is grown in the volcanic soils of the Northern Rivers of New South Wales.

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and previously in Papua New Guinea with Wirui Airservices and Talair, was keen to grow produce on their new 18 acres of land. He had explored the idea of growing tea, but the soil wasn't quite right. Instead, he recalled the many coffee crops he'd flown over in PNG, and suggested coffee trees may be a suitable option, and it was.

“We took a huge gamble when we planted the coffee trees. The altitude is quite low for coffee but the Tweed Valley has high rainfall, which is suitable. However, the first year was hot and dry. We just didn't know how the plants would survive,” Zeta says. “After extensive trials, the New South Wales Department of Agriculture suggested K7 Coffea Arabica trees would be the best for our climate and soil, and the best in terms of flavour and yield for growing in the Northern Rivers area. We planted about 2000 K7 trees to begin with, and the odd Catuai, in October 1994. We purchased each seedling for about \$2.50 to \$3.00.”

For the first few months, Zeta's time was spent doing unrelenting hand fertilising and weeding. After 18 months, Zeta lost 70 per cent of the crop due to 5.5 feet (1.67 metres) of rain that hit the Tweed Valley.

“It was a tough time, but we got through it. Once the trees mature, coffee is actually a fairly easy and clean crop to maintain. It's like a weed. You can have half a dead crop and then suddenly with a bit of rain and four months later, it revives,” Zeta says.

In 1998 the farm's first harvest produced just 50 kilograms of coffee. Then came the realisation. “We had coffee cherries but we had to learn what to do with them. All of a sudden we were faced with a steep learning curve of how to harvest, how to process, and how to roast,” Zeta says. “I read lots of books, taught myself about roasting, and bought a fluid air-bed roaster, which I found to have such incredible consistency.”

Back in the early 1990s Zeta says she had some support from growers in the Australian Subtropical Coffee Association, but her remote location made it hard to attend regular meetings. “The isolation was tough and in some ways it still is. The hardest part is staying aware of trends and developments when you're so distant. But what gave me strength is that I was running my own business and I was growing my own brand. That's what I loved.”

Zeta says it was only when she started travelling to industry events in Sydney that she began to network and meet inspiring people to fuel her passion. However, she says the best connections were established once she began roasting as Carool Coffee Traders in 1999.

“Roasting was so foreign to me in the beginning. I remember ringing David Peasley [author of the *Australian Subtropical Coffee Grower's Manual*] to say: ‘Come and try it. I think it smells alright and it tastes OK too.’ When David came over I made

him a plunger coffee and he said: ‘Zeta, it's bloody good’,” she recalls. “Our coffee is naturally low in caffeine due to the climate, but it's rich and full of flavour. After only a year into the roasting business, I entered our Carool Coffee into the 2000 Sydney Fine Foods roasting competition. I was nervous about going up against the ‘big guys’ in the industry, but I knew if I didn't try I'd never know how our coffee would compare.”

As it turned out, Zeta won third place for her coffee in the plunger category. The following two years she won Champion Show trophy for the same coffee. “Winning was very rewarding, and it certainly helped our brand recognition,” she says.

At the time, Zeta says the trends in the roasting industry were about blends and espressos. Coming in with a single origin coffee was “discounted” because it wasn't “a blend”. “We've stood by our goal from the start, which is to be at the forefront of single origin coffee production in Australia, and make people aware of Australia's great local produce,” Zeta says. “Thankfully, over the years more people have started appreciating single origin coffees.”

Zeta sold her roasting business in 2006 and openly admits it was a decision she regretted. “When I look back it was a mistake, but I was worn out at the time. When I was ready to pick myself up and try again I started Zeta's Coffee,” she says. “I remember finding my original business plan and read that my goal was to produce one of the finest single origin coffees in the world. That was my goal then, and it still is.”



Carool Coffee Trader's Carool Coffee won the 2001 and 2002 Champion Show Trophy at Sydney Fine Foods.

However, the journey hasn't been easy. Right from the start of her farming career, Zeta says she's endured the stigma that Australian grown coffee "can't be good" as espresso because it's not grown at high enough altitude.

"People used to scoff at local coffee, especially traditional roasters. What we don't have in altitude we make up in other ways. We have a subtropical climate with rich volcanic soils and because of that there's no pests associated with our crops. My response to sceptics is: 'Have you tried Australian coffee?'" Zeta says. "I think of Australian grown coffee as a life cycle. We grow it to support our local community, which in turn helps maintain the local environment, supports local growers, and the local economy."

Zeta says the last few years have been much easier. "It's been amazing to see support from roasters and baristas who are keen to connect with the origins of the coffee they use. Awareness of local growers has increased significantly and it's still on the rise," Zeta says. "Baristas want to 'go to origin', but why spend hundreds of dollars on overseas travel when they can go just 30 minutes from Gold Coast airport?"

Over the past 20 years, Zeta says what's been most rewarding is seeing the transition and growth of Australia's coffee farming

industry. "When we started growing we were always told to remove any weeds near out trees, but now we happily leave them in. It's all about promoting ground cover, and providing a protective barrier around the trees," she says.

Another advancement has been the shift from hand-picking to mechanical harvesting. "We hand harvested our coffee for the first few years, in fact it's still our preferred method, but it's just too time consuming and costly," Zeta says. "We had a partnership with a local backpackers where we would invite tourists to come and help pick the ripe cherries from June through to October. We had lots of different nationalities including Japanese tourists to a Colombian medical student, whose father laughed at the thought his son had travelled halfway around the world to pick coffee."

Nowadays, Zeta has a Penagos harvesting machine to pick and remove the skin and parchment from the cherries. "What would take five months and \$21,000 to hand-pick 3000 trees now takes three hours and \$5000 with the mechanical harvester," she says.

Once harvested, Zeta's coffee is taken up to Emu Paddock at Byron Bay Coffee Estate where Farm Manager Mark Bullivant pulps and passes it through a demucilager in a washed process. The coffee is then

transported back to Zeta's farm to be sun dried. "When we dry coffee it looks like we're a developing country. I have beans scattered around the edges of the house and any concrete surface available," she says.

In the 2014 crop year, Zeta produced just 300 kilos of green beans. She says in the early days they used to produce 1.5 tonnes of green coffee each year. "Last year we had a crop failure. It was a really dry season that affected all of the Australian coffee farmers in some shape or form. There were plenty of cherries on the trees but they just wouldn't come off the branches," she says.

Judging by the full branches on Zeta's K7 trees this year, it seems the crop has vastly improved. "After 20 years we have some trees that are thriving and lush, and others that look a little defeated. We're looking to experiment with some new varieties and if suitable, we'll go about planting them in batches," she says.

Zeta is in the process of handing over her roasting reins to Richard Bradbury, now Roaster and Visitor Manager at Wirui Estate. In the meantime, Zeta is focused on producing the finest single origin crops she can, and inviting people to make their first origin trip an Australian one. "We're not the biggest coffee farm in the world, but that was never important to us," Zeta says. "This is our origin, and I'm proud of it."

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