

Agri-Links Happenings..

Seminar #1 - Back to Basics



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Weird and wonderful fruit and veg grown by Apsley's Cindy Cross was one of the highlights of a "Back to Basics" foodie inspired seminar run by the Limestone Coast Agri-links committee.

The committee's first seminar for the year was held at the Naracoorte Art Gallery on May 19 and featured Cindy Cross, Naracoorte's Jason Van Leuven and Coonawarra's Sue Bell as guest speakers. The trio outlined their passion for and journey with good food and wine, with Jason opening the floor for discussion to an audience of about forty people.

While he runs Van Leuven Chocolatier and Van Leuven Culinaire with his French-born wife Sylvie, Jason said he wasn't sure if Sylvie was as passionate about food as he is. "Sometimes she says, "Jason, can you *please* stop talking about...food!"

He said he places an emphasis on simple food and "not over complicating things". "Since the 1980s when we jumped into new vogue cuisine, everything has started to become more complicated.

"The one thing everyone missed was basic cooking, but now...everyone's gone back to basics. Everyone's been trying to reinvent the wheel for the past 20 years, but now, people with the basics and the skills in their fingertips are leading the food revolution. "Now things are slowly turning back to regional communities and small areas. "It takes a long time (for change). It happens very slowly, but everyone has to speak the same language. You have to educate the consumers first (because they're the ones) who are going to drive it.

"People need to know the benefits of buying local, of buying from a farmer. "We need to start to encourage this in our local communities, so we're not dependent on cities. "A lot of people prefer to buy their produce from a market. This is something we need to develop, but it's not going to happen overnight."

Winemaker Sue Bell agreed that change happens slowly, but said that sometimes that was a good thing.

She said: "I've worked for various wineries and now I've got my own label Bellwether Wines.

"My portfolio is two wines, a Coonawarra cabernet and a Tasmanian chardonnay. "I won't be extending my brand until I choose to. "But in my career I've worked with about 20 (different) varieties. I've got a fairly clear picture of what I like – cabernet and chardonnay – and so I make wines that I like to drink.

"To pursue a passion it does take a lot of time. I remember at uni living on toast for a week to be able to go to a champagne tasting.

"I learnt by tasting and talking and sensing. "People will say a wine tastes like my grandmother's garden or something and that's very personal. "I will never forget my first vintage – the smells etc and even now I'll hear a song on the radio and it will take me back to a vintage and the people I worked with.

"It wasn't just the bright lights or the fancy restaurants that drew me back here (to Coonawarra)...it was the fruit and the fact that every season is brand new."

She counted winning medals at the Limestone Coast Wine Show during her time at Stonehaven in Padthaway as one of the memories "dearest to my heart," but hoped greater things were to come. Sue started selling her wines to all states of Australia last year and has exported to France. She will soon send her wines wrapped up in coloured tissue paper "like a box of artisan crayons" to Germany, Singapore and the US.

Cindy Cross, horticulturalist turned chef runs a business called Amber Ridge with her husband Mark who grows fresh fruit and veg, while Cindy cooks it.

After running and owning a garden centre for nine years the pair now work off their own property growing and selling wholesale plants, using organic principals.

Cindy brought the smells, sights and colours of her autumn garden into the art gallery including sugarbeet, dill, fresh apples, quinces, a citrus fruit called a Buddha's hand, rhubarb and different varieties of carrots, potatoes and pumpkin, to share with seminar attendees.

She said beetroot was an "easy" plant to grow and could be planted anytime, while she has up to six weeks of fresh apples on the trees in her garden. "It's an awesome feeling to pick an apple off the tree for my child's recess.

"I think something we've lost is the seasonality of food. "Growing great tomatoes is one of my passions and they're great for pots. "The pain for me is buying a tomato when mine are finished and I sulk and I sob for three weeks before I go and buy one. "And of course it's not seasonal, so it's not as good, I feel.

"(As for) apples, my jaw just drops when I go into the shops and see a Pink Lady in January.

"I think we demand particular things from the shops and all of a sudden we're getting asparagus in March...it grows in August.

"It's been shipped from another part of the country. It's artificially grown and it's still so green – that concerns me. I think "what do they do to get that here?"

"I think we do lose touch with that seasonal variety.

"I'm also growing sapphire potatoes, pink fur apples, which is another kind of potato and nicola potatoes, which make a good floury mash.

