

homegrown

FROM A SLOW FOOD ADVOCATE TO REVOLUTIONISING FARMING, WARNDU CO-FOUNDER REBECCA SULLIVAN IS ON QUITE A JOURNEY.

WORDS HANNAH JAMES PHOTOGRAPHY LUISA BRIMBLE

EVERY SO OFTEN there will be a rush of newspaper articles about Indigenous foods – a chef at a hatted restaurant in Sydney who’s using ribberries or saltbush – and a journalist will declare their time has finally come. And then the news stories die away.

Not this time, says Rebecca Sullivan, 41, who co-owns native foods company Warndu with her partner Damien Coulthard (both right), an Adnyamathanha man from the Northern Flinders and Gammon Ranges in South Australia.

“In the last seven or eight years, we’ve seen a huge change from it just being a trend to something we believe is here to stay,” she says. “Demand is outweighing supply, and the industry is really exciting.”

Like Damien, 37, Rebecca grew up in SA, and comes from a family that was embedded in a farming community. “But I could never have told you where my food came from,” she says. That all changed when she went to the UK, to the Royal Agricultural College to do a Masters in sustainable agriculture. She became the Youth Ambassador for Slow Food UK – but when she returned home 10 years later and met Damien, “I had a sort of hypocrite moment. I thought, ‘I’ve been championing local food my whole career, but I’ve never tried anything local’ – meaning native food.”

The pair, along with a business partner, launched Warndu to try to change that – for all Australians. “It put me on a much more authentic path,” Rebecca says. “Even though it’s not my culture, it’s a much more authentic fight for me because it involves food reconciliation and culture, and the environment. Without these plants in our soils, we’ll be in trouble with the changing climate. These are the plants and foods that are supposed to be here. They’re not just food, they’re medicine, and they’ve sustained Aboriginal peoples for tens and tens and tens of thousands of years.”

So Rebecca and Damien’s dreams for Warndu are far grander than simply selling native foods. They also run



educational programs, and have a cookbook out, *Warndu Mai*, with another to be published in October, *The Native Food Companion*.

The couple are the directors of the upcoming Quandong Festival in the Flinders Ranges, and have secured Bruce Pascoe, Paul West and Costa Georgiadis as speakers. Damien is also a working artist and teaches Aboriginal children at the Tjindu Foundation, and they’re parents to son Mallee, two, who will be joined by a little brother in August. Yet their biggest initiative of all goes even further.

“Our big goal is to set up a climate-resilient communities model in rural Australia,” explains Rebecca, who lives with her family on an off-grid farm in the Clare Valley, and is expecting her second son with Damien. “We’re planting a demonstration garden to show other farmers how they can integrate native foods in their already existing crops.”

Native foods, she says, don’t just adapt to our changing climate; they’re nutrient-rich superfoods, and many of them fix nitrogen back into the soil. “So, really, we’re an environmental business more than a food business.”

And the secret to the couple’s achievements is a sense of urgency. “Damien’s grandparents are gone, which means their knowledge and their language have gone with them,” says Rebecca. “Food and language go hand in hand. So we knew we couldn’t just wait for the right time to start up – we are conscious that we’re running out of time.”

Yet they also have a generational view of their mission: “The work we’re doing is never going to be achieved in our lifetime. It’s a legacy project. So we hope Mallee and our younger son are as proud of their culture and heritage as Damien is, and that they’ll want to continue this work.”

Given their parents’ passion and work ethic, it seems that this, too, is a dream likely to be fulfilled. *CB*
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