



Feeding Families

Moving from London to Singapore at the end of 2008 was a conscious lifestyle decision for her family, says SASHA CONLAN. Choosing to eat food from sustainable sources is another, she adds – and that's what lies at the core of the food import business, **The Barbie Girls**, that she established four years ago.

What's your business ethos?

I'm a believer in going back to nature, to buying our food from fishermen and farmers who care about the marine environment, about the land around them and the people who work for them. For me, it's such a pleasure not only to deal with people like that, but also to have the opportunity to meet them on their farms and to be educated about their farming practices.

How did it all start?

Fresh lamb from New Zealand was my first product, and it's still a bestseller. My first overseas visit was to the lamb farms north of Auckland, and from there, to an egg farm near Wellington, then down to Mount Cook Alpine in the Southern Alps, where our salmon comes from.

As we're focusing on sustainable seafood, tell us something about your salmon.

I import king salmon every week from the most beautiful environment: a freshwater salmon farm established in the glacial water that flows into

Lake Tekapo, in the Mackenzie Basin. Absolutely free from environmental pollution, the water is straight off the glacier, and pure enough to drink.

This farm is regarded in New Zealand as one of the most ethical and sustainable farms of its type; even Seafood Watch has recognised its 100 percent sustainable farming practices. Did you know that no antibiotics or hormones are allowed on New Zealand farms? Almost unbelievably, there is no animal disease in the country – so, not only are antibiotics against the law, but they're also completely unnecessary.

What made you choose this farm over the others, then?

Its salmon benefit from swimming against the strong water flow, which makes their flesh naturally red and less fatty. As a result, it has a very pure taste, very un-fishy. It's sashimi grade, and most of it goes to Japan; I'm the only one importing it into Singapore.

It comes in fresh, having been vacuum-packed at source as whole sides (about \$61.90 for a 900g side)



and individual portions (\$10.90 for a 150g fillet, or a little less if you buy eight, say). Amazingly, the salmon reaches our freezers within 48 hours of leaving the water.

If there's a flip side, it's that it's not always easy to get the fish out! Recently, for example, the farm was completely snowed in and they couldn't send me any fish that week.

You bring in other fish too?

Yes, I bring in swordfish, deep-sea trevally, groper and blue cod from a supplier in Nelson, New Zealand, whose company is approved by the MSC (Marine Stewardship Council). It's not only wild, but each one has been caught in the most sustainable way: using the long-line method – not by trawling, which damages the seabed. Like the salmon, it's portioned and vacuum-packed on site; unlike the salmon, it's frozen at source.

Incredibly, everything we buy has been caught to order especially for us. I'll get an email saying, for example, that one of the fishermen has a sick child and had to go home – can I wait a few days more for the cod? I love the personal service!

Who are your customers?

We supply only to families and individuals in Singapore – and from the feedback I'm getting from one of my drivers, our customers are getting younger and younger, and an increasing number of them are local.

All orders are taken online, and delivered the very next day to your

home, from Mondays to Saturdays, island-wide. We have two delivery trucks, custom-designed to be half-chiller, half-freezer. Deliveries come from the freezer room and the chiller room in our warehouse, having been sent straight there from the airport. (My kids love to play in the freezer at minus 18 degrees Centigrade – though they last only about five seconds!)

For me, it's not about bringing in huge amounts at a time and catering to the whole of Singapore. Instead, it's about feeding families, and doing it in a way that's not too expensive for them. However, I'd rather have a big pool of customers who care enough to pay a little more for extraordinary quality, rather than a small niche group that can afford to pay high prices.

How good are your prices?

Though I keep my costs down by not having a shop, and huge mark-ups are not what I'm about, nothing that I sell would be considered cheap. You will certainly find fish, meat, eggs, dairy and other products at lower prices elsewhere – but then you wouldn't be comparing like with like.

What do you love most about your business?

As I mentioned before, the chance to connect with ethical producers all over

the world. It's such a privilege to be able to do that, and meeting up with farmers and other producers on the ground – on their farms and in their factories – gives me enormous peace of mind about our products.

I'll soon be visiting a fish-smoking house in Scotland, where they smoke salmon in the old-fashioned way, maybe we'll have a look at bringing in smoked kippers and smoked haddock, too – that's something I miss terribly! There's a poultry farm in Norfolk that's on my list, plus a turkey farm in Essex, and I'll also pop into the beautiful pig farm in Essex, Wicks Farm, that already supplies me with high-quality pork. The pigs are fed on a natural diet of wheat and barley that's grown and milled on the farm, and they're completely free from any nasties, including antibiotics and growth hormones – and that's very unusual for pork.

The one possible downside is that my children, Grace (13), Albert (10) and Layla (6) have been raised on this wonderful produce and so they see it as the norm. Before they visit other people's houses, I have to tell them: 'Don't ask them where the food came from – you have to eat what they're given!'

thebarbiegirls.com

