



Enterprising women

Blessed is the cheesemaker



Anne Fulwood

Rather like her exceptional Charleston soft brie, Kris Lloyd oozes with optimism, but even she is amazed at the growth of her company Woodside Cheese Wrights. In the last six months of 2011, revenue climbed 35 per cent compared with the same period in 2010.

In 13 years she has turned around the Adelaide Hills business that she bought in 1999 for what she guardedly says was "not much, but not a steal", despite starting with no knowledge at all about cheesemaking. Her first move was decisive. "I got up there, ordered three skip bins and threw out the lot," she says.

A marketing executive in her previous life, she had coincidentally spent time on food safety programs, as well as on business and strategic planning. She married into the renowned Lloyd clan, which had established Coriole Vineyards in McLaren Vale. They wanted to expand their offering and Lloyd was fired by the possibility of fresh food products. What do you serve with wine? Obvious, isn't it . . . but they didn't know a thing about cheese.

After 18 months, Woodside was still throwing a lot of cheese away,

so Lloyd turned her hand to the ancient art. "I just fell in love with it," she enthuses. "What an amazing process to take something as simple as milk and turn it into something as gloriously complex as cheese."

And therein lies a lot of the story of the success of Woodside, which Lloyd insists is predicated, absolutely, on consistency and quality of product. So many

variables can impact on the finished artisan cheese product. For example, the vagaries of weather and the seasons or the quality and composition of the milk. Even the cheesemaker that turns the cheese can affect its flavour. If the cheese isn't up to scratch, Lloyd will not allow it to go to market.

These days her "spoilage" – the cheese she throws out – is almost at zero, she says, and would generally be caused by a bad batch or, what cheesemakers call, a "dead vat" of milk. Of about 80 tonnes of cheese produced each year, spoilage accounts for less than 0.5 per cent, according to Lloyd.

Over the past three years, Woodside has added a retail version of its bulk range of "everyday" cheeses, won gold medals at World Cheese Awards and has developed "uncommon" offerings that attract attention from chefs, the

media and consumers.

"I'm not frightened to make a cheese that's different and gets noticed, especially when I put flowers on it!" she laughs. "It might seem gimmicky, but it works."

(Her flower-bedecked Monet cheese is in high demand.)

Lloyd was also a finalist in the Veuve Clicquot Business Woman Award, which was won this week by the chief executive of tea retail chain T2, Maryanne Shearer.

Educating herself, her consumers and the industry is something Lloyd is passionate about. She pestered the South Australian government to establish a TAFE course in cheesemaking, corralled her cheese fraternity into an association, went overseas to study and now presents masterclasses at a slow-food festival in Italy, held every two years.

Lloyd is also the driving force behind Adelaide's annual October CheeseFest, into its seventh year in 2012. "I have always said that we should work in numbers, grow the pie and there will be room for everybody," she says. "If someone tries a South Australian cheese and they don't like it because it's badly made they are unlikely to try another."

About 44,000 tonnes of specialist cheese was produced around the



country in 2011 – just a slice of the total production of 340,000 tonnes given the bulk is basic supermarket cheeses. Woodside Cheese has found its niche among some 80 boutique or artisan cheesemakers and Lloyd reckons she has a market share of about 11 per cent.

A network of retailers across Australia stocks the Woodside collection, including David Jones and Thomas Dux. She has distributors in each state, but doesn't supply the big chains as "the volumes are beyond us".

Underpinning Woodside's revenue growth is consistent quality, Lloyd says. But it can be an expensive strategy. The makers of the big supermarket brands can pay as low as 23¢ a litre for milk, she says. The premium she pays is "well over that".

"For the sake of comparison, I don't charge \$3 a kilo for my cheddar either, but I could charge from \$30 to \$65 a kilo depending on the type of cheese," she says.

Part of the premium paid comes from buying from a single herd, to "have the luxury of making a single-herd cheese". To ensure her margins are strong, Lloyd makes in bulk, but she packages her cheeses into smaller units.

As sales skyrocketed in the second half of 2011, Lloyd had to rewrite

her business plan. "It is a living document," she says. "I'd be mad to put it on the shelf and not look at it for years." She focused on producing the most popular cheeses, as well as adapting pre-existing products.

Anyone who has spent time with Kris Lloyd will come away feeling energised, such is the confidence she imbues in the people around her, and she feels a deep responsibility to pass that on.

"Everything is highly competitive these days, so you have to take a positive and confident approach, but you become accustomed to having success around you," she insists.

"The whole cycle can be repeated in business and in families. I am now seeing it in my sons. They are high achievers and they want to win." (Mitch is 18, Alex 17).

She credits the influence of the enterprising Lloyd family, which she joined after marrying husband Paul. Among the one sister and four brothers was the late Guy Lloyd, the entrepreneur whose eponymous aviation company offered the fly in, fly out services to the growing mining sector in the '80s.

Meanwhile, it's back to the cellar and another order to fill. Growth rates between 5 and 10 per cent during the previous three years were nothing compared to Woodside's 2011 cheese boom.

"I don't know what they're doing with the cheese," she laughs, referring to her clearly expanding customer base. "The amounts people bought were staggering."

Anne Fulwood has 30 years' experience as a journalist on newspapers, radio, TV and online. She works with small business through the Telstra Business Awards.

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Cheesemaker Kris Lloyd had soaring sales in 2011 so she had to rewrite her business plan.
Photo David Mariuz

