

Feature articles

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THE SOUTHERN FORESTS, WA

In the mid 1900s, many Macedonian and Italian farmers planted their hopes in the rich soil of Manjimup and Pemberton in southern Western Australia. Kami Ramini experiences this close connection to the land and the renowned produce that have put this region on the culinary map.

Photography Jackson Eaton

Vic Peco of Peco Estate looks over his beef farm. Clockwise from right: one of the many farm animals at Foragers, the rolling hills of the Southern Forests, Slow Food member Mary Rosshall's harvest from her garden, Tony Fontanini of Fontanini's Fruit and Nut Farm, prawn and mango salad at Pemberton Millhouse Cafe.



Homegrown
Carnarvon, WA

This remote town 900 km north of Perth has benefitted from perfect growing conditions, gaining a reputation for its extra-sweet banana variety, plump tomatoes and piquant chillies, as Kami Ramini discovers.

Photography Rebecca Mansell

While keen fishermen throw their lines off Carnarvon's One Mile Jetty and outdoor sports enthusiasts get their fill of surfing, canoeing and kite-boarding, the farmers up and down Gascoyne River are producing a plethora of fruit and vegetables, which has resulted in this region earning the name of 'Western Australia's fruit bowl'. With this accolade comes family tales of long-time homes in a new-found land.

Starting my journey along the Gascoyne River, past plantation after plantation and farm after farm, I couldn't help but be amazed by what I saw. In December 2010, Carnarvon was ravaged by a devastating flood that brought its horticulture industry to its knees. However, with government assistance and the community's steadfast spirit, the area is slowly re-establishing itself, and the roads are once again lined with bananas, tomatoes, mangoes, capsicums, table grapes, watermelons and so on. You name it – chances are it grows here. "It's our climate," explains Linda Lyall, a local farmer whose family has been harvesting bananas in Carnarvon since the 1950s. "Our dry, subtropical climate makes it ideal growing conditions."

Linda's grandfather, Pio De Boni, came to Carnarvon in 1927 from Era, a small town in northern Italy. He was one of the first from Era to make Carnarvon home. Today, most of the local Italian community originates from that same town and, not only that, stems from just a few families. "The names De Boni and Andreoli are everywhere here," says Linda. "My mum, Teresa, was a De Boni before she married and my husband Steven's sister married an Andreoli. Lots of cousins!"

Farming here is all still very much a family business. Pio's original banana farm, Era Plantation, is run by Linda's uncles, Domenico and Peter. Her uncle, Romeo, and his wife own the second family farm, and Linda and Steven have their own plantation, which they bought 11 years ago. All growing bananas, all within a stone's throw of each

other and all sharing a "chief banana cutter," Linda's mother, Teresa. "Mum is amazing. She's always out there working. If she's not at our plantation, she's at Dominic's and Peter's."

All three farms belong to a co-operative called the Sweeter Banana Co-operative, founded in 1985 to help develop a brand that Perth consumers would recognise as the local, sweeter Carnarvon banana. The name isn't just a gimmick, adds Linda. "Nine out of 10 people preferred the taste of Carnarvon bananas according to a blind study conducted by Curtin University," she says. "Because of the dry, subtropical climate, our bananas take 14 to 16 months to mature, so they're smaller, have a thinner skin and taste creamier and sweeter," she says. They're also certified chemical-free.

Sweeter Banana has two major lines: the Lunchbox Banana, their premium product, and Smoothie Bananas, which have been "bred by nature." "Our bananas bruise easily because of their thinner skin, but they're still sweeter in a smoothie than any other banana," Linda asserts. While Steven looks after the day-to-day running of their farm, Linda works part-time as a teacher's aide. As well as their seven-year-old daughter, Angela, they're also foster parents to seven-year-old Leon and 10-year-old Akume. "I grew up on Era Plantation and now they're growing up on ours. Whenever they want a snack, I say, 'Go out and find some bananas.' They love picking them from the trees," she adds.

While bananas still hold the production top spot in Carnarvon, juicy, sun-ripened tomatoes are hot on their heels. The local tomato industry began in the 1940s with the influx of European migrants, but, in more recent years, it's the Vietnamese who've been pulling in the numbers. One of those tomato growers is 56-year-old Dao Nguyen. "If you ever need me, you know where to find me," he says, smiling as he appears from the rows and rows of tomato plants in front of his house.