

CONSUMING PASSIONS

SHE MAY BE QUEEN OF THE WASHED RINDS, BUT VICTORIA
McCLURG PROMOTES A STRONG 'ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL'
COMMUNITY OF YOUNG REGIONAL FOOD PRODUCERS.

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Victoria with her primary suppliers.
FACING PAGE The Nietschkes' farm at Koonunga provides milk that, Victoria says, has consistently good fat and protein levels throughout the year.



ABOVE The champion... Victoria has twice won the Australasian Cheese Competition's supreme prize. LEFT In this artisan factory, everything is done by hand, including the adding of the cultures and rennet. BELOW Paddocks give way to the beautiful Barossa landscape.



THERE'S A QUIET confidence about Victoria McClurg. She moves about her Barossa Valley Cheese Company store-cum-factory with purposeful steps. Her gaze is direct as she explains her approach to the business. And yet there's a beautiful gentleness about her. Perhaps Victoria has mastered the harmony between work and life with her five-year-old son, Wilbur. Or, maybe, she's content now she's found kindred spirits in the Barossa Valley food culture.

This 34-year-old cheesemaker set up shop with her mother, Frances, in 2003 in the main street of Angaston, one of the Barossa's most picture-perfect towns. Within a few years she was producing Australia's top washed-rind cheese and, arguably, the best cheese of any sort, having won the 'Grand Champion' title at the Australasian Cheese Competition in 2007 and 2008.

"The Wanera is our flagship and we want it to be the regional cheese in the Barossa," Victoria says. "I want it to be like the Epoisses de Burgundy [a pungent and celebrated French cheese]. I also want it to encourage other cheese producers to focus on what they're really good at, and what this area is really good at, then promote that strong regionality."

We. Barossa. Regionality. Community. Sharing. Victoria's sentences are dotted with these words. The area's food culture is very much alive among its younger generation of custodians, who form a creative melting pot of real people doing real things with an appreciation for real food.

"My friends in the Barossa talk about food in a totally different way than our friends in the city," Victoria says. "We hunt and gather what's in season, we use what's in season, we appreciate the really simple dish of tomato with some salt on it. That real flavour from growing produce."

This sharing culture of the valley has a strong resonance with Victoria. She describes moving into the area as "like a rest haven... because as much as you work hard, you are working for the pleasure and enjoyment of it". She started out in winemaking — "I had a strong desire to do something different and get my hands dirty" — but it wasn't until she spent time in France's famous wine regions that she discovered her true passion.

"In Bordeaux, I was tasting a lot of cheese and eating a lot of food. I just got this thing for flavour. Then, when I was in the Loire Valley, I was driving my little car along long skinny roads with sunflowers each side and I stopped on the side of the road at a telephone box, phoned up Mum and Dad and just said, 'I don't want to make wine any more, I want to make cheese.'"

Today, her factory — "it's tiny, really" — turns over about 100,000 units of cheese a year. She says there is potential for "phenomenal" growth, but she has a firm ceiling on the volume she wants to >



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CLOCKWISE White mould cheeses are stacked to mature and grow their distinctive coating; Victoria checks the texture of fresh curd before separating the whey; the cheesemaking team... Helen Reid, Benson Sobotta and Victoria; a sign in the dairy; milkers at the ready; cheesemaking is a tactile process for Victoria.



"I stopped on the side of the road... phoned up Mum and Dad and just said, 'I don't want to make wine any more, I want to make cheese.'"





CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT Milking starts at 7am at Koonunga; the award-winning Wanera cheese; camembert wrapped and ready to be labelled; the smart shopfront in the main street of Angaston.



“Cheese, wine and food bring people together — and bringing people together is what your life should be about.”

produce and that is determined by her lifestyle. “My priority is not my work,” she says. “I love my work, but my priority is my son Wilbur. The stability of his world is the most important thing to me, and the other bits and pieces fit around that.”

On Victoria’s website she’s listed as director, head cheesemaker, chief innovator, brand manager, retail manager and winemaker. It’s a big call for a single mum. She gets up early to walk her son to school, then heads to the factory and jumps in her ute with a 1000-litre tank on the back to pick up the day’s milk from a nearby dairy farm, which is fed into her vats through a “gentle pump”. Then the magic happens.

“With cheese you do need to discover and you do need to try things and experiment with what you are doing,” she says. “The way that I make a camembert

and the way another person down the road may make a camembert, even if we were following the same recipe, it would turn out quite differently.”

There are 14 cheeses bearing the Barossa Valley Cheese Company label (plus three wines crafted as cheese accompaniments), and Victoria is working on a fifteenth she expects to be out in spring. Any hints?

“It’s a regional cheese and it’s about collating wine and cheese together, so I’m using grape skins. If it doesn’t work, that’s okay — but we will try!”

And that sums up Victoria McClurg: daring to be different and following her passion. “Cheese, wine and food bring people together — and bringing people together is what your life should be about,” she says. *
The Barossa Valley Cheese Company is at 67b Murray Street, Angaston SA. (08) 8564 3636; barossacheese.com.au

