

Creating a living from a passion for food and wine

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Robyn Lewis's career has spanned an array of industries, ranging from forestry economics in Zimbabwe to agritourism in Malaysia, all of which built the foundations for her venture VisitVineyards.com a website boasting Australia's largest database of wine producers.

Ruth Lyons and Chelsea Dunsire spoke with Robyn recently about her unconventional journey and a lifelong passion for food, wine and travel.



Tell us about your background pre-Visit Vineyards.com? We understand you've been a bit of a squiggler?

My first degree was in Economics (majoring in Resource Economics) with Science as a sub-major – it's still a relatively unusual combination, but at that time was unheard of. I then undertook a Master of Science degree at Oxford University, majoring in Forest Science. Having the combination of life sciences and economics made me very employable, and still today there are very few economists apart from agricultural economists who bridge that divide. (We can also see this in our Parliament – many of our MPs have legal training, but no understanding of the natural world, the laws of nature, chemistry or physics).

When I left university, I don't think I could have envisaged where I have ended up so far. The Internet and with it entire industries, such as IT, have evolved since then, and continue to do so. Only a few years ago, there was no Facebook, twitter or social media – now, these platforms connect billions of people worldwide, and the Internet of Things, Robotics, geolocation/contextual marketing and more evolve at a rapid pace. It's adapt or be irrelevant, or certainly very constrained. I think the idea of a linear career went out when the internet emerged and may not be seen again.

I became the Forestry Economist for Zimbabwe (the country is about the size of NSW), and from there ended up working for the World Bank in Kenya and then the Asian Development Bank in China and other Asian countries, designing, managing and monitoring agricultural development projects, and using both my economics and science skills. I found I had a flair for project management and strategic planning in particular.

I ended up living in Malaysia for four years and really absorbed a lot of that culture, and gained a good perspective on Australia as seen through Asian eyes. It was there I also got involved in agritourism – which didn't even have a name in the 1990s! – in the tea industry. From there I returned to Australia, first in Far North Queensland and then in Victoria, and got involved in marketing and wine. It was an easy transition!

It was my project management skills and interest in art – and especially antique Oriental ceramics – that brought me back to Tasmania however, to work with David Walsh to establish his museum of antiquities at Moorilla, now MONA. I was the inaugural curator and project manager, and it makes me very happy to see what a world-class icon and tourism drawcard that has become. Turning vision into reality is really very rewarding.

When did you first develop your passion for food and wine?

My passion for food and wine dates back to my childhood in Tasmania. My mother was not a particularly gifted cook, and quickly discovered that I had a knack for it, so she largely left cooking to

me. She loved to dine out, however, and I can still remember once being given a sip of red wine at an Italian restaurant as a child, by a maître d' who explained how essential wine was to good food. So the seeds were sown early, and continued on my travels round the world. In Asia I learn to cook a variety of cuisines and even ended up teaching Nonya cooking back in Australia! I've always been very experimental in my cooking and am right into sous vide at the moment.

What gave you the idea to create VisitVineyards.com, and what sets it apart from other food and wine sites?

Having worked in Asia with the largely Chinese tourists visiting the tea plantations, and observing firsthand the desire they had to learn more of the sources of their food and beverages (remember, this was the 1990s and long before there was any perception of this here), I realised that this wave of culinary interest was going to hit Australia, first in wine, then in food. The original plan for VisitVineyards.com started back in 2001, and right from the beginning I combined wine and food.

Today, it also includes microbreweries, cideries and distilleries, very few of which existed when I started. VisitVineyards.com now has Australia's largest database of wine producers – including the long tail of small ones that others seem to miss – and the only database that also includes food producers and sellers. We cover all States and Territories – the number and quality of Australia's producers still continues to astound me, and I often think how lucky we are, especially when I think back to some of the places I've lived and worked in.

Yours has been a career of 'firsts', what drives you to innovate, and how important is innovation in driving your business?

I think being innovative is something that is inherent in most children, but many seem to lose it, or put it on hold until some future date. I guess for me that was simply impossible as my mind is always brimming with ideas! However the important thing to learn is that there is a large difference between having ideas and turning them into reality, especially commercialising them. There is so little taught about this either in Australian schools or universities, even today, and in my opinion it is holding Australia back significantly.

As for VisitVineyards.com, it would not exist without innovation, and we have made a lot of tech developments along the way. Unfortunately, like most small businesses in Australia, we are constrained by a lack of capital, so many of these ideas we cannot commercialise. Banks will not lend unless they have real estate for security, something an online business cannot offer. Fortunately for Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, they have VCs and financiers who don't have these restrictive views, with the result that America is moving far ahead of Australia in the online and IT space. It's going to be very hard for us to catch up, and now Asia is leapfrogging us as well.

You were awarded the Nokia Innovation Award for Tasmania in the Telstra Business Women's Awards, what impact has the win had on your business?

The win was a great morale booster both for myself and my team, but after the initial buzz died down, there wasn't a lot of feedback. Some other States have active alumni groups who assist with ongoing PR and in keeping winners in the public spotlight, but Tasmania lacks that, probably due to simply not having enough people and the ubiquitous lack of capital and resources. However of course it looks great on the CV and it helped when I was negotiating alliances with large organisations like the RACV.

What challenges have you faced while establishing your business and how did you overcome them?

There have been many. One of the hardest is learning to share the vision, because if you can't do that then nothing can happen. So become a good communicator.

Then two weeks after our market launch the GFC hit. As an economist I knew what was coming next, so I changed direction pretty well straight away, to a B2B model (alliances with the motoring organisations) instead of relying on B2C. What I didn't realise was how much they would eventually get hit too, and change their models. However, we are still here! Another biggie is lack of capital. I was very fortunate to be one of only two women to raise a significant amount of capital when I did, just prior to the GFC. If that had hit earlier, we would have been finished before we started. And the other main challenge is being ahead of the wave, and hanging on until it finally got here! There's no doubt that an entrepreneur's life is a marathon not a sprint, and two of the most important qualities you need are tenacity and endurance. In the end you just outlast the competitors who spring up and fade away – I've seen at least 10 a year do that. Of course, you need to offer a great service, too.

What do you think have been the most important innovations in technology in the last 10 years, and how have you integrated them in your business?

In our sector: social media, mobile tech, cloud computing, the ability to 'pinpoint market' and currently the integration of sensors, data analysis and contextualising information and marketing. If I had even 1/1000th of the resources (both capital and staff) that large companies such as say Woolworths or Coles could command for this sort of work, I would have been able to do so much more. It's very frustrating knowing what you want to do and can see a demand for, and being unable to do it, and worse, seeing big companies bypassing you as a result. Because of course they will eventually dominate the Australian market.

I am quite fearful for the small business sector in Australia, I have to say. In my opinion, it needs a 'marketing makeover', as the word 'small' conjures up connotations of inferiority, lack of power and a perception that it can be sidelined, whereas the reality is that the small business sector is the largest employer in Australia, and where the biggest growth in employment and wealth could come from, if only it were not under such serious pressures and constraints.

This is particularly true for women, many of whose future jobs will, on the whole, either be running or employed in small businesses. If we don't pay attention to this very, very soon, the economic situation that we currently see in Tasmania (high unemployment, poverty, etc.) will be spreading to other States.

Describe your 'internal rudder' – what guides you in times of change?

A very strong set of beliefs – in myself, my goals, my ability, my vision and what I am doing is right. It's never just been about profit (maybe a mistake!) but also about what I can do for the sector as a whole, and for regional Australia. I won't do anything that I don't believe is the right thing. And, if I think another company is in some way shonky or not acting in the right way, I won't do business with them. My husband has a saying "never do business with crooks, because you can never win" and he's right. Better to save your energy for someone else, and remain true to yourself.

I can also see changes coming a long way off – perhaps because of my economics background, and a good sixth sense, plus the fact I'm almost always online and listening out for trends – and don't seem to have any trouble charting a course to deal with them, or changing it quickly if necessary (as we had to do with the GFC). Where I do have trouble is in getting others to see what to me is obvious. For example, culinary tourism has only just been picked up on this year by Tourism Australia; I've been working on this for more than 10 years.

The other important thing is the backing of my family. Innovation and commercialisation is not a path to tread alone, unless I suppose if you have very deep pockets and a hide like an elephant. You will need support and advice from others, too.

How important has community and collaboration been to the growth of your business?

My support community is largely online, and a significant percentage is international. You have to seek out like-minded people and businesses you might want to emulate or collaborate with, and today it doesn't matter where they are. If I might offer some advice, choose people who are positive, and constructive with any criticism they might offer. You'll have enough buckets of cold water poured on you from those who don't understand your ideas or lack imagination, so you'll need a good support network.

This requires some time investment online, but if you join special interest groups via social media, and ask questions and interact, you can fairly quickly work out who the movers and shakers are, and then introduce yourself and go from there. It's all about building relationships, just like in the so-called 'real' world. Online is just as real.

I also find that you can approach people directly online and they will usually answer; there seem to be fewer 'gatekeepers' online than we see in Australian companies if you try to get through to them by phone, for example. Internationally people seem far more approachable, and respectful. So say for example if you see a business model in the US that you think might apply to you here, just contact them online and chat with them there. I've recently been talking to some people very high up in a large company in the US whom I contacted via LinkedIn. They were, I think, rather amazed that someone in Australia had even 'reached out' as they say, and responded very well. But then of course it's back to the difficulty of translating this into outcomes when constrained by lack of capital.

As for collaboration, most of that has been online as well. This might change though, as more people

and businesses are starting to understand the online space and there are more people 'in real life' to talk to and collaborate with.

What advice do you have for aspiring business women considering establishing their own business?

Find a niche, a profitable one, then do market research before proceeding. Get online, fast. Network. Test, and if it doesn't work, try something else – treat 'failure' as a learning experience. Try not to be undercapitalised, because it's a real drag in terms of time and energy. Keep healthy. Maintain family support. Pick your husband or partner well! Give up the idea of long holidays, or take mini-breaks instead. Learn to get up early. And, if you are going to turn your hobby into a business, realise that you will need another hobby (if you ever have the time!) because your former hobby is now work. For me, this means I can never read a wine, food and travel magazine or website without it being work!

Some other tips:

- If possible, have an office away from home – even if it's only a few metres (but if you have children, preferably further, so you can get into the right headspace and avoid interruptions)
- If possible, have 2 desks – one tidy one for your focussed work, and the other one for more creative project work. I actually have four (including the multipurpose one at home). One is for dumping stuff on, to sort later.
- Divide your time – every day – into strategy, operations and management. Never lose sight of the big strategic picture and revisit it regularly.
- Don't forget marketing (under operations). So many businesses I see fail to address market access and how to reach and engage with consumers cost effectively. Online is no silver bullet if you are not prepared.
- Social media is not free. Anything that takes your time is not free. Your time is your most valuable asset, use it well.
- Use cloud services wherever possible, and especially for managing your time. My most valuable tool is Google calendar, which we also use for internal comms.
- Be disciplined. Small business is no walk in the park, especially with a family, but it's doable if you are disciplined and stick to your schedules. Sorry, but this does mean saying "No, I am at work" to that person who wants to drop in for coffee, or whatever. They will get the message eventually that during certain hours you are unavailable.
- Look after your staff. If anything goes wrong, they will be the ones carrying the can for you, so make sure they are empowered to do it well, and are skilled at customer relations.
- If you hate answering the phone, employ someone who is good at it! Ditto sales and accounting, or whatever your deficiencies are.

Learn to enjoy and embrace every day – I love meeting new people, learning new things, and would not trade this for a 9 to 5 job and superannuation anyway, even though I'd probably have been financially better off in the corporate or government world. I don't want to get to my 70s and say 'if only I'd had a go'. We are living in the revolution of our lifetime and I want to be part of it.

How did you find your niche and make it profitable? How has your 'internal rudder' guided you in times of change? Join the conversation by sharing your answers below.

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Breena Tremsal Jul 1, 2014 1:52 PM

Absolutely right with having 2 desks!!! I have one for my papers, drawing, plans, and one with the desktop. :) unfortunately I cannot afford to have an office out of the house I have to work when the kids are at school or at day care 3 times a week, or early morning. I try not to work when they are around, it puts too much pressure on me, but still running a small business from home you never stop. There is always an idea popping now and

have to write it down, or quickly send an email.

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