

IN PROFILE

Female Fortunes

WHO:

Innovative businesswoman
Robyn Lewis.

WHAT:

VisitVineyards.com.



Destination DELECTABLE

Tasmanian entrepreneur Robyn Lewis understands the challenges women face starting a business in Tasmania.

The founder and chief executive of VisitVineyards.com, an online guide to culinary travel, started her business nine years ago, and has seen the website grow to cover the entire country, have more than 35,000 subscribers and outrank three state tourism sites.

Last year her achievements and new developments saw her awarded the Nokia Business Innovation Award for Tasmania at the 2010 Telstra Business Women's Awards.

VisitVineyards.com is a 'new media' publisher, which brings together travel destinations from all over Australia, and showcases activities for people interested in wine and food travel.

"At the start I did a lot of market research and looked for something that would have growth potential, on which consumers spend money," explains Robyn.

"We focus on the niche of culinary travel, which I identified as meeting that criteria."

The research – and her hunch that a wave of food travel would follow wine travel – have proven correct, with culinary travel almost the only growth sector in Australian tourism currently, both domestically and inbound.

Passion and industry knowledge are prerequisites. "I love wine, food and travel – the commitment required to start and commercialise a business means it's essential," Robyn says.

Robyn taught herself to be IT savvy, and has recently spoken at an international conference on the rising phenomenon of social media.

"We are experiencing the revolution of our lifetime," she offers.

"I made a decision that I could either stand on the sidelines and watch it happen, or I could be a part of it."

After setting up the website, Robyn had a break to start a family, before refocusing on the business in 2007.

"The biggest constraint at the beginning was time: doing everything myself," she recalls.

"Then there was the difficulty of getting people to take you seriously, especially when they have no idea what you are trying to build.

"Starting up is one thing, commercialising was another huge challenge."

Robyn had to sell her house to raise capital to launch the business, which now turns over just under \$1 million.

"It's difficult to source capital in Tasmania, especially in the online space, but it's particularly hard being female – in the year I was successful, I

was one of only two women in Australia to raise the level of capital I did."

Robyn says while gender issues in business still arise today, they are not as prominent as in the past.

"The lack of networking and mentoring nationally are big factors and are probably true for anyone in such a fast-changing industry, but particularly so being female," she says.

"Businessmen have their lunch meetings and clubs, from which women are still largely excluded, and that is an issue, but I'm pleased to say it has improved hugely.

"Social media breaks down these barriers. I can 'meet' and engage with peers anywhere; they don't care where you are or if you are female, they discuss and help with ideas and contacts. I may never physically meet many of them."

VisitVineyards.com has formed alliances with motoring giants RACV, RACT and RACQ and is expanding under the AAA umbrella.

"Culinary travel is a car-based activity, so there are natural synergies."

However, Robyn had to be persistent – the RACV alliance took four years to finalise.

"It's the first ever alliance of its type RACV entered in its 108 year history, which I think shows the trust they place in us." >>

<< The RACT alliance allows participating wine and food businesses in Tasmania – such as Josef Chromy Wines and Ashgrove Cheese – to reach over 7 million AAA members nationally, something they cannot do on their own.

Robyn says she was delighted to receive the Nokia Business Innovation Award and accepted it on behalf of her team of 12 employees.

“Almost all of what we do is innovative and there is a lot of behind-the-scenes innovation, so it was a big pat on the back for everyone. My team is integral to our success – anyone who thinks you can do it alone is kidding themselves.”

Most of the VisitVineyards.com team is based at Cambridge, in Southern Tasmania.

“We also have staff in Melbourne and Adelaide, because I believe you need to have people on the ground where your markets are.”

Earlier this year VisitVineyards.com put a lot of their own work aside for a large fundraising effort to aid victims of the Victorian and Queensland floods and cyclone.

“We raised \$277,000. Our website sold 95 per cent of the tickets in five weeks – if we were selling paper tickets we could not have raised that amount of money,” Robyn says.

Fundraising over, 2011 is another growth year for VisitVineyards.com.

“Online just continues to expand, and the new frontier is mobile,” Robyn believes.

“The only constant is change. You need to be intellectually curious, embrace technology, and always look at what is coming next. Look for the potential, not for reasons why it can’t be done. And never be afraid – usually what you think might be problems are resolved or never happen.” **E**

