

# SUGARLOAF PRODUCE

Written by Ann Stanley

## 'IT'S A LABOUR OF LOVE'

Isabella Amouzandeh is passionate about education, especially education about the importance of clean, locally grown food. With her partner Warren Mckimmie and young son Felix, she lives at the picturesque Sugarloaf Produce farm, a 75 acre property in Strathewen which was passed to the couple by Warren's father who wanted to keep it in the family.

The property is nestled in a valley at the centre of which is the young family's beautiful mudbrick house, built over seven years using recycled materials, and now owned outright.

'Every brick was laid by Warren's own hands,' says Isabella, 'and some of the mud bricks were made on the site.'

The interior is decorated simply and strikingly with Persian art and craftwork, reflecting Isabella's Iranian roots.

Their pride in self-sufficiency, along with Warren's commitment to his family's farming heritage was the couple's original motivation for producing food, but they overestimated how much they would need for themselves. So now, as well as producing most of the fresh meat and all of the vegetables for their household, they sell their surplus to markets and restaurants.

Sugarloaf Produce sells mushrooms, eggs and a small amount of fruit and vegetables at the Eltham Farmers Market and cannot keep up with the demand there for their produce.

In addition to the Farmers Market, the Farm supplies fresh produce to restaurants, Bridge to Eden and Greasy Zoe's in Hurstbridge. When they have even greater excess they sell it to Ceres Fair Food and the Melbourne Food Hub, which is based at the Alphington Market site and provides parcels of locally grown food. And at the peak of the summer growing season they have sold at Carlton, Collingwood and Abbotsford Farmers' markets as well as at Eltham.



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**Eltham  
Farmers  
Market**

## ‘WE SELL EVERYTHING WE GROW’

‘We sell everything we grow,’ says Isabella, ‘and we could probably sell four times more if we had it. We get lots of enquiries but we just don’t have the capacity to meet the demand.’

In turn, they take all of Greasy Zoe’s food scraps for composting in a system that includes horse manure and the green waste from the Farm.

Isabella’s commitment to change in the food system is evident in her clear articulation of what she thinks could be done locally to decrease the community’s reliance on industrial scale food production and distribution. Experience has taught her that there is a strong demand in the community for fresh local food grown using biological farming techniques, including organic, biodynamic and regenerative methods, and therefore great opportunity for food growing enterprises to develop in Nillumbik. But there is work to be done at government level to match the community interest

She believes ‘local government could be doing much more to support small-scale agricultural enterprises growing food for local markets.’

‘Nillumbik is in need of a service for small batch meat processing, including poultry, to accommodate the needs of small growers, who are at the moment prevented by health regulations from processing their own meat.’

In the highly regulated egg industry, Isabella suggests ‘there could be a sliding fee structure so that smaller operations can afford to comply with the health regulations and sell their eggs to the public.’

She also recommends that local governments support the wild harvesting of deer, the numbers of which are continuing to grow in Nillumbik Shire. Having seen twenty deer killed in one night’s culling, Isabella believes there is great potential for a new business in the area that would provide a source of income for landowners as well as jobs.

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'As well as this there could be more grants for small scale farmers to upgrade infrastructure to support locally produced food as well as assistance to access the subsidies already available.

'Small farmers who are time-poor and often expertise-poor also need help writing business plans and the land management plans for rate subsidies,' says Isabella.

The couple employs three or four casual farm hands to keep up with the work their farm requires, especially as Isabella works several days a week as an environmental planner for the City of Whittlesea.

As well as growing food the couple take responsibility for revegetation and weed control on their land and have recently introduced goats to eliminate the need for herbicide. Isabella does concede that regeneration is made difficult by the small flock of sheep and their small herd of cattle, which have a significant impact on the land. But they have established some eucalypts and other paddock trees.

A walk around Sugarloaf Produce farm is an inspiring experience that proves that it is possible for local farmers to make a significant contribution to food production. Isabella has no doubt that this contribution will grow as more people shop locally to support local farmers and learn how to eat with the seasons.

Sugarloaf Produce does not use plastic in the growing or packaging of their mushrooms, but does rely on compost that comes packaged in plastic.

Most seedlings come from Richard and Pia at Kabuu. This ensures that they get the seedlings at the right size at the right time for planting.

Isabella is hoping to contribute to The Food 2 Schools Program and is offering both incursions and excursions to school students.



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