

Embedded in the field

A radio journalist with a passion for natural disasters turns her hand to her other great love – farming. **Natalee Ward** reports

ABC Radio journalist Louise FitzRoy has traipsed across farms in every state in Australia, meeting growers as diverse as the country is wide. But despite the joy of meeting what she calls an incredibly optimistic group, she has become concerned for their future.

“It’s frustrating to see that not enough is being done to promote local growers,” Louise says. “If we don’t support them, the nation’s food producers might not be around for much longer.”

Louise grew up on a farm near Guyra near Armidale in northern NSW where her parents grow Angus beef, prime lamb, merino wool, soy beans and other crops on 2000 hectares. “I was privileged enough to grow up with an understanding of the hard work, dedication and love that goes into producing food,” she says. “The simple joy of picking ripe tomatoes from the vine and cooking them straight away.”

Louise started working life with ABC Radio in NSW’s Hunter Valley in 2006. This was followed by postings in Tamworth, Alice Springs, Port Lincoln on South Australia’s Eyre Peninsula, and then it was across to Western Australia to Bunbury near the Margaret River wine country.

“It was here that The Cold Esky Challenge began,” Louise explains. Within days of arriving in 2008, Louise met local boutique wine operator and foodie Gavin Cahill and together the pair cooked up an idea for a radio series where they would visit as many of the region’s food producers as possible.

“We would get two Eskys, fill them with fresh local produce and interview the grower,”

Louise says.

The pair would then head off to find a recipe for the produce and Gavin would match it with a wine.

“It was incredible,” Louis says. “Part of my job was to go out and physically do it, to see exactly how our food was produced. I wasn’t a journo sitting at a desk. I was out there collecting honey in a swarm of 5000 bees, or digging for truffles in the rain. The amount of microphones we went through – so many of them ended up in the mud.” The journey lasted eight months before it was time to move on.

Since then, Louise has continued her trek around the country, more recently covering bushfires and floods in Queensland and Victoria. “I’ve become known as the Natural Disasters Girl at the ABC,” she says.

Louise’s latest posting is acting presenter on ABC Rural’s Victorian Country Hour, and now the 27-year-old has put her farm experiences into a book. *From Paddock to Plate* (ABC Books) is a collection of stories from Australian farmers on what they do, how to grow the produce and where to buy it, plus traditional recipes from the growers themselves.

Louise spoke to more than 70 farmers for the book – asparagus, tomatoes and pomegranate producers from Victoria, wasabi and saffron from Tasmania, potatoes and oysters from South Australia, venison from Western Australia, watermelon and dragon fruit from the Northern Territory, linseed, macadamias and mushrooms from NSW, just to name a few.

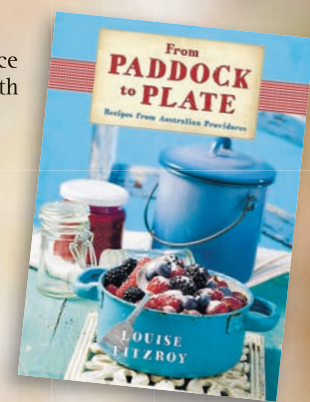
Despite their diversity, Louise says there are certain common elements that unite all the farmers she has met.

“Farmers are so optimistic,” she says. “One green-tea farmer had his whole plantation affected by frost, but he wasn’t put off. He was just going to get up tomorrow and keep going.”

“And they are innovative. Some of them are out in the middle of nowhere, on their own, and they can always think of something or some way to solve a problem.”

A third common element has helped Louise every time she has grabbed a microphone and headed out to yet another property, be it a vineyard, orchard or veggie patch.

“Farmers are always ready to pass on their experience and their knowledge,” she says. “I have collected generations and generations of knowledge that, if it isn’t passed down, is going to dissolve into thin air.” **F**



Making waves: radio journalist and author Louise FitzRoy. Picture: ZOE PHILLIPS