



Homegrown

Carnarvon, WA

This remote town 900 km north of Perth has benefitted from perfect growing conditions, gaining a reputation for its extra-sweet banana variety, plump tomatoes and piquant chillies, as Kami Ramini discovers.

Photography Rebecca Mansell



With world-famous sites such as Ningaloo Reef and Shark Bay on either side of it, and a virtual year-round summer, it's a wonder this seemingly sleepy coastal town isn't better known.

While keen fishermen throw their lines off Carnarvon's One Mile Jetty and outdoor sports enthusiasts get their fill of surfing, canoeing and kite-boarding, the farmers up and down Gascoyne River are producing a plethora of fruit and vegetables, which has resulted in this region earning the name of 'Western Australia's fruit bowl'. With this accolade comes family tales of long-time homes in a new-found land.

Starting my journey along the Gascoyne River, past plantation after plantation and farm after farm, I couldn't help but be amazed by what I saw. In December 2010, Carnarvon was ravaged by a devastating flood that brought its horticulture industry to its knees. However, with government assistance and the community's steadfast spirit, the area is slowly re-establishing itself, and the roads are once again lined with bananas, tomatoes, mangoes, capsicums, table grapes, watermelons and so on. You name it – chances are it grows here. "It's our climate," explains Linda Lyall, a local farmer whose family has been harvesting bananas in Carnarvon since the 1930s. "Our dry, subtropical climate makes it ideal growing conditions."

Linda's grandfather, Pio De Boni, came to Carnarvon in 1927 from Era, a small town in northern Italy. He was one of the first from Era to make Carnarvon home. Today, most of the local Italian community originates from that same town and, not only that, stems from just a few families. "The names De Boni and Andreoli are everywhere here," says Linda. "My mum, Teresa, was a De Boni before she married and my husband Steven's sister married an Andreoli. Lots of cousins!"

Farming here is all still very much a family business. Pio's original banana farm, Era Plantation, is run by Linda's uncles, Domenic and Peter. Her uncle, Romeo, and his wife own the second family farm, and Linda and Steven have their own plantation, which they bought 11 years ago. All growing bananas, all within a stone's throw of each

other and all sharing a "chief banana cutter," Linda's mother, Teresa. "Mum is amazing. She's always out there working. If she's not at our plantation, she's at Dominic's and Peter's."

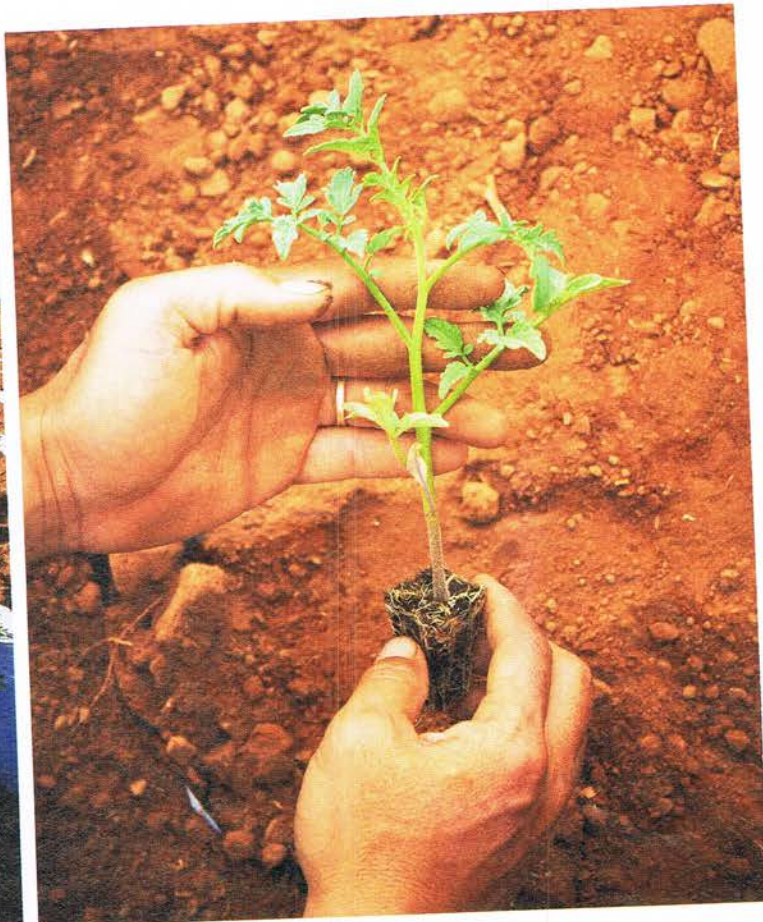
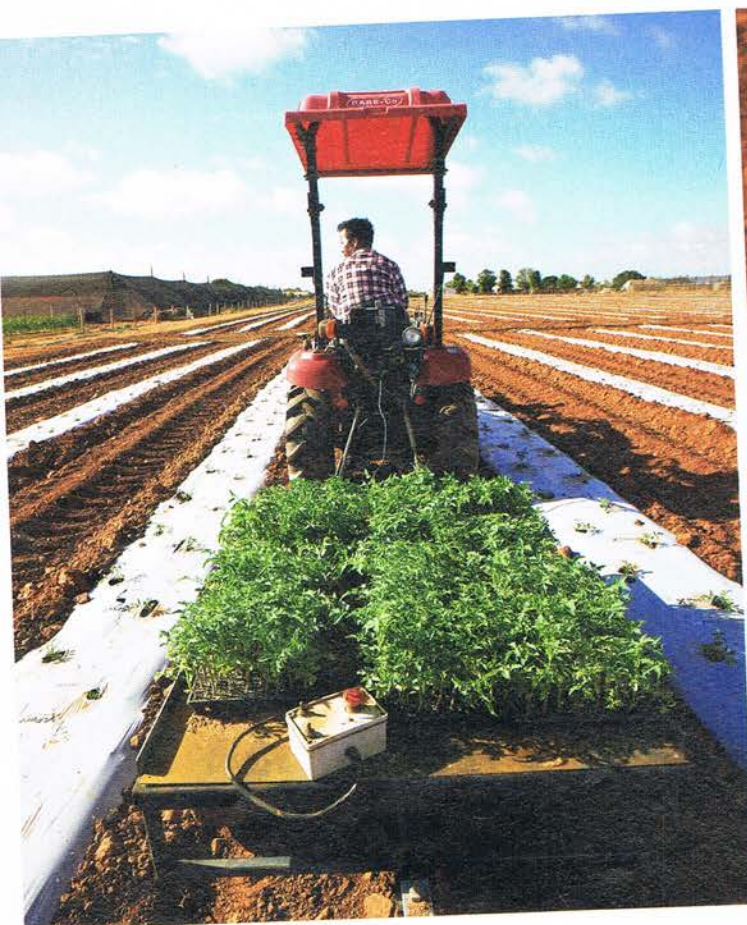
All three farms belong to a co-operative called the Sweeter Banana Co-operative, founded in 1993 to help develop a brand that Perth consumers would recognise as the local, sweeter Carnarvon banana. The name isn't just a gimmick, adds Linda. "Nine out of 10 people preferred the taste of Carnarvon bananas according to a blind study conducted by Curtin University," she says. "Because of the dry, subtropical climate, our bananas take 14 to 16 months to mature, so they're smaller, have a thinner skin and taste creamier and sweeter," she says. They're also certified chemical-free.

Sweeter Banana has two major lines: the Lunchbox Banana, their premium product, and Smoothie Bananas, which have been 'tickled by nature'. "Our bananas bruise easily because of their thinner skin, but they're still sweeter in a smoothie than any other banana," Linda asserts. While Steven looks after the day-to-day running of their farm, Linda works part-time as a teacher's aide. As well as their seven-year-old daughter, Angela, they're also foster parents to seven-year-old Leon and 10-year-old Akume. "I grew up on Era Plantation and now they're growing up on ours. Whenever they want a snack, I say, 'Go out and find some bananas'. They love picking them from the trees," she adds.

While bananas still hold the production top spot in Carnarvon, juicy, sun-ripened tomatoes are hot on their heels. The local tomato industry began in the 1940s with the influx of European migrants, but, in more recent years, it's the Vietnamese who've been pulling in the numbers. One of those tomato growers is 36-year-old Duc Nguyen. "If you ever need me, you know where to find me," he says, smiling as he appears from the rows and rows of tomato plants in front of his house.

Linda Lyall (centre) has banana-growing in the blood. Her Italian grandfather, Pio De Boni, was one of the first to immigrate to Carnarvon and establish a plantation. Opposite, from left: Duc Nguyen, one of Carnarvon's largest tomato growers, tends to his 90,000 plants.





Duc is one of Carnarvon's biggest tomato producers, yielding an incredible 630 tonnes per year from his 90,000 plants. He's well respected among his peers for his methodical crop management, nutrition and irrigation systems, but he's quick to play it down, "A tomato plant is like a baby – you just feed, water and nurture it and it'll grow," he says. Not quite true, as the bundle of string tied to his belt testifies. Duc carefully hand-ties each and every plant.

Duc, too, is part of a local grower-buyer group. Loveapple delivers his tomatoes, a mix of Roma and Gourmet, to Perth alongside those of seven other Vietnamese growers. While surrounded by his fellow countrymen, Duc's life is a far cry from his hometown of Lagi Ham Tan, a fishing village 120km from Ho Chi Minh city. He arrived in Perth in 1981, aged five, as a refugee with his father. They eventually settled in Carnarvon in 1990. "We came because my father had friends here," says Duc. "At the time, there weren't many Vietnamese. There were a lot of punch-ups when I was at the local high school!" he laughs.

But Carnarvon soon became their home. Both Duc and his father learned how to farm tomatoes on the job and built their way up. Duc eventually purchased his own property with his wife, Thi My, in 2007. He has been growing tomatoes for 15 years now, almost half his life, and, as more and more Vietnamese moved to the area during that time, the industry has boomed. "We just like these tomatoes! It's not a cultural thing – in Vietnam, we don't eat many tomatoes. It's really more a quantity thing. We just grow so much," he exclaims.

As for the future, Duc says he'll push forward for another year or two, then maybe slow down, stop working the 12-hour days and "let the others have a piece". But he certainly has no intention of living anywhere else. "Carnarvon made my life, so I won't be moving from here, that's for sure," he says.

Steven Yelash is another grower whose life is intermingled with Carnarvon's horticultural history. Born in Drvenik, Croatia, he arrived in 1974 at the age of 24, after a friend returned from Carnarvon with tales of opportunity. "About 100 people from my village had come and gone through Carnarvon. My village never had more than 500 people, so someone from every family had been here," he says. "There was a lot of work in Carnarvon – at the time the main crops were beans, pumpkins and bananas." Steven's wife, Rosanda, joined him in Australia in 1975; they married in Carnarvon and have been on their farm ever since. Starting with beans and pumpkins, the couple then moved into bananas, followed by tomatoes. For the last 10 years or so, they've been specialising in zucchinis and five varieties of chillies (baby hot, bird's-eye, caysan, habanero and jalapeño), which they supply to a major supermarket chain.

For the Yelashes, like so many growers in Carnarvon, farming has been as much a career as a way of life. Their two children are now grown up and living in Perth, but they have many other 'children'. "Last year, we had about 50 different backpackers come to stay – sometimes a week, other times the whole season. Some fall in love

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with Carnarvon and come back again and again," says Steven. "I have Korean, Japanese and Taiwanese children. They're our extended family around the world," Rosanda adds with a smile. "

No trip to Carnarvon is complete without at least one stop – and a big shop – at Morel's Orchard. Seychellois husband-and-wife team Jean and Doris Morel have been in Carnarvon since 1987, and their little shop, jam-packed with homegrown, hand-picked, washed and packaged fruit, vegies and confectionery, has become a local institution. "A large percentage of our customers are locals," says Doris, "but we get a lot of tourist trade, too. Some have been coming to us since we opened."

The couple happened across Carnarvon almost by chance, stopping overnight during a road trip with Jean's brother, Jacques, back in 1987. "Jacques liked it so much he bought a farm during that holiday," says Jean. "A few months later, we bought six acres of this block and, after a year, we expanded to 11 acres." They've never looked back and, today, the Morels work their 11 acres to the maximum. Their main crop is papayas, which are sent to Perth, and the rest of their produce is dedicated to the shop. The variety of their stock is mind-boggling: nearly 30 different fruit, vegies and fresh herbs on sale, all

painstakingly hand-picked, washed and some even packaged to seal in freshness. Spring onions, chillies, sweet paprika, eggplants, silverbeet, strawberries, papayas, custard apples, black sapote... the list is endless.

Customers also come from far and wide for the Morels' 100 per cent fruit ice-cream in mango, strawberry, black sapote, sour sop and custard apple flavours (some dipped in chocolate), their 'fruit leather' (strawberry, banana and papaya/banana blend) that's made by puréeing fresh fruit, dehydrating it and then cutting it into strips, and their dried bananas, a personal favourite. "After we close the shop every day, we make batches of ice-cream and the fruit leather," Doris says. "Sometimes we can't though, because we've sold out of stock."

With my flight back to Perth looming, Doris won't let me leave without filling a bag full of salad greens, herbs, strawberries and a complete range of fruit leathers "for the plane", and insists I pick out an ice-cream. I go for the black sapote ice-cream dipped in chocolate. At first bite, it's instantly clear why Morel's Orchard is a must-stop shop and I only wish I'd visited it sooner. In the car, I only get about 100 metres down the road before I turn back for one last taste. I can't leave without trying that custard apple ice-cream. »



The Sweeter Banana Co-op sorts and cools the crop of 25 local banana growers, then delivers them to retailers as a singular brand. Left: A view of Carnarvon over the Facine Waterway.



SHOP

The Gascoyne Growers Market (Civic Centre Courtyards, Camel Lane) is on every Saturday morning from May to October. Stock up on award-winning sauces and preserves, plus fruit ice-cream and cakes at **Bumbak's (449 North River Rd, (08) 9941 8006)**. You can also do a tour of Bumbak's plantation while you're at it. Don't miss the fresh fruit ice-cream at **Morel's Orchard (486 Robinson St, (08) 9941 8368)** and be sure to have a taste of their banana/papaya fruit leather for a sweet fix.

EAT

Set in a tropical garden on the banks of the river, **River Gums Café (24 Margaret R.O.W. (08) 9941 8281)** serves up fuss-free fare packed with local produce. Try the River Burger with a mango smoothie. Right on the waterfront, **The Carnarvon Hotel (121 Olivia Terrace, (08) 9941 1181)** offers front-row sunset views and a simple menu specialising in local seafood. **Gwoonwardu Mia Gascoyne Aboriginal Heritage & Cultural Centre (114-148 Robinson St, (08) 9941 1989)** is a top spot for a light lunch and one of the best coffees in town. Check out its award-winning, permanent exhibition, which bagged the top award at Museums Australia's 2012 Museums and Galleries National Award (MAGNA).

STAY

The Best Western Hospitality Inn Carnarvon (6 West St, (08) 9941 1600) is an ideal base. It's within walking distance from the town along the picturesque Facine Waterway, and all rooms are comfortable and well-equipped. 

The Yelashes check on the wind breakers that protect their crops. Clockwise from below: the gourmet range of Bumbak's local orchard and plantation; Teresa Bickley, daughter of Pio De Boni, cuts bananas on Era Plantation; Doris Morel labels her fruit leather by hand.

