



CAROLYN IMLACH

PHOTOGRAPH JAMES BRAUND



Carolyn Imlach is many things; successful (by her own definition and no one else's), unconventional (no television for this household), camera shy (try pinning her down for a photo shoot) and a true original (we've never encountered anyone quite like her)... See, Carolyn views life's curve balls as opportunities. It's an attitude that has seen her establish and grow a fabulous wholesale and retail business on the back of hand-rolled soap balls made from the highest quality, cold-pressed, extra virgin olive oil. Following her initial soap-ball success, Carolyn developed a range of body products made of similarly high quality ingredients. Her wholesale customers can't get enough, her beautiful store serves a stream of devoted customers and the phone rings off the hook... Time to expand and cash in on the millions? Not for Carolyn, not in the slightest... Df

Df How long ago did you start Est?

Carolyn How long's it been? Well my daughter was three when I started so it's been 11 years now. I had been working for a textiles company doing product management - so it was quite different to what I'm doing now - but the company I worked for closed down their furnishing division and I went out with it, along with a lot of other people. It was quite a shock really. I was put in a space, as you are when you're made redundant like that so I sat down and, rather than rushing out and trying to find something else in a hurry and in a frenzy, I actually decided to stand still, to be in that space and to do things that I enjoyed doing. I gave myself that opportunity. I'd been paid out so financially I was okay and I had time to spend just quietly relaxing and so that's what I did for a time.

Df How old were you when that happened?

Carolyn I'm 45 now so I was 34 then.

Df So you'd been working full time for 12 years or so before that?

Carolyn Well I hadn't worked in textiles all that time. I'd worked in real estate for seven years on the [Mornington] Peninsular down here in Victoria. When I was 22 I started off selling potatoes in their jackets. I had three of these [jacket potato] ovens made and I set them up in shopping centres... When I was 25 I had a cafe in busy St Kilda. I think if you have a look at what I've done in my past, there's always been a creative element to it, in some way I've used my hands. So being made redundant wouldn't have felt like the end of the world because you knew you could do other stuff?

Df Absolutely, and it wouldn't be the end of the world if I stopped what I'm doing now. I'd actually see it as an opportunity.

Carolyn I think that you have to embrace change because it offers you an opportunity. Without us realising it,

*it's not
until you look back that you see that adversity and
all of those types of things give you a gift,*

there is a gift in there.

Perhaps I learned that because my father had done different things in his life. My father was very much like that too, so for me it wasn't a scary thing. I was on my own with two children when it happened...

Df Surely that's a little bit scary.

Carolyn That is a little bit scary, but I was never going to be the destitute, poor me, sole mother type person. There's always hard times and there's always difficult times but that's just part of life no matter what you do. One of the things I did was make soap...

Df Earlier or after you'd been made redundant?

Carolyn After I'd been made redundant. This is the part that's actually quite odd because years earlier I'd shown an interest in herbalism. I'd read material that was about herbalism going right back to Medieval times. I used to dry a lot of flowers

Photograph Saffrine Nydegger

*All of a lather

By Kate Bezar

I have a very vague memory of making soap in high school science class. Somewhere between performing a titration and reciting the periodic table, we actually saw how science worked to make something we used daily.

Ask me now how we did it and I wouldn't have a clue, but neither at first did the lovely ladies of Lesbos in Ancient Greece who soap-love says were the first to really discover the beauty of suds. Indeed, the process of making soap, saponification, is named after Lesbos's most famous resident, the poet Sappho.

It is said that after sacrificing a beast by cremation, the women washing in the river downhill from the site noticed that their togas (I'm guessing) were markedly cleaner than usual. Fat from the carcass had

dripped into the ashes and formed a liquid which was running into the river. Ashes contain alkaline compounds and it's the combination of fat and alkali that makes soap.

It is also the balance between fat and alkali that makes a soap soft on your skin or harsh. In poor quality or mass-produced soaps the manufacturers will allow for an excess of alkali in the finished product. This is great for its shelf-life but not so great on your hands. The excess alkali will seek out all the natural oils in your skin and saponify them (i.e., turn them into soap), leaving you with that 'squeaky clean' feeling. This is what irritates particularly sensitive skin. However, when soaps are handmade, the maker will generally allow for an excess of fat or oil. An unsaponified

oil is called free fatty acid and add to the moisturizing effect of high quality soaps. Nothing's ever quite that easy and neither is making yummy soap, if too much oil remains it won't create a lather.

Today, solid fats like coconut oil, palm oil, tallow which is rendered beef fat, or lard which is rendered pork fat (even nicer), are used to form bars of soap that stay hard and resist dissolving in the water left in the soap dish. Oils such as olive oil, soybean oil, or canola oil make far softer soaps. Castile soap is any soap made primarily of olive oil, and is known for being mild and soft. That's the gist of it, but essentially the process takes oils which make you greasy and turns them into soap which makes you clean. You don't even need to be a chemist to love that.

and herbs and grow my own plants, so I'd been in that space in some aspect for some time. When I lived down on the beach at Sorrento I used to have dreams in which I saw myself selling these balls. That was actually where I think Est came from. It has always been there for me. So I went to the library and researched soap-making (*see page 74 *All of a lather*). I'm a pretty good researcher. If I'm going to do something, whether it be baking a cake or whatever, I'll really go and have a look at all the different options and come up with something that fits the bill. I went out and invested in beautiful oils and played around. I just stayed at home and made soap. I came up with soap balls, was quite happy with them and gave them away to my friends. One day I was having coffee with a girlfriend in [a store called] Husk here in Melbourne and I gave her a ball of soap as a gift. She said, 'Look these are great. You could sell them in here.' I said, 'I don't know what I want to do with them, I can make them, but for me to go out on the street and start selling them, that's another thing.'

She replied, 'Look you've got no courage, I'll be your courage.'

She was actually meeting with Husk to represent her mother who takes photographs of wildlife and was having an exhibition there. Her mother also didn't have the courage to go in herself. So my friend said, 'Here I am, I'll represent the both of you' and she did. It went from there. The owner of Husk, Justin [Abrahams... profiled in *Dumbo feather*; Issue 2], bought them and then Georges [the Melbourne department store] discovered them and it went on and grew from there. I sold them at markets and it just grew... It's been 11 years now and we've gone from nothing to turning over \$800,000 per annum which is a lot for a little business. A lot of that is generated by me going to markets, country markets (*see page 79 *To market, to market*). I actually love that aspect of it still.

Df You must otherwise I'm sure you wouldn't still be doing it.

Carolyn It's not because I have to do it, it's because they are my customers, and it's important that my business, Est, which makes the skin care with olive oil, is still represented out there in terms of selling that way. I think it's important - you can't let go of that part of your business. If you grow so big and losing sight of your beginnings can be quite tragic. You have to know that you still love what you do. It's not about money for me. I don't sort of sit down and think about money and I don't think I ever have - it just comes when I need it. I suppose I can generate as much as I need to generate. It's a choice really. I also have a retail store which has gone into another realm again and it's not really just about my products. We are at our maximum capacity now but I don't feel like I want to go beyond that. I don't want to go beyond having one store and me doing half a dozen country markets a month. That's enough for me and it fulfills me.

I don't need to go out there and be big and great and have chain stores...

which is what a lot of people have asked me to do. People have asked me to franchise my store, but how would I ask the people who produce amazing things for me in here to make 10 times more than they make already? I have some wonderful craftspeople who wood-turn or hand-knit or whatever. I can't ask them to do that, they're not motivated by that either.

Df You said that the store isn't about your products... What is it about?

Carolyn Well we make our products out the back in the kitchen so when you walk into the store you get the amazing aroma of the oil, in fact the aroma hits you before you even get into the store. You can see into the kitchen which is beautifully done. It's a a very rustic style kitchen which has been purpose-built and I think that there's something about that which is attractive to people. They like to see you produce what you do, why should it be behind closed doors? Making our products is beautiful to watch so it's a big drawcard for people I suppose. Then in the store, we hang onto this natural, handmade philosophy. There's various threads to it, but for example we bring in beautiful, handmade brushwear from Germany to accessorize what we do, we bring in natural linen by the metre and then make it up into aprons and that sort of thing.

It's about raw materials really, you could almost call the store that.

I bring string in from Belgium, amazing, big balls of linen string; chunky string balls and fine linen string for knitting and embroidering and people will come in and be inspired by that. In turn it inspires others to do something. You can make a choice; you can buy something that's finished, or come in and buy the raw material and go away and play with it and see what you come up with. There's one lady who makes string bags for us. She lives in a caravan. We post her string and she posts us back the string bags in a garbage bag. I love that. We're not about mass production or any of that, we're just about supporting other people who also have a craft, perhaps by using their skills to produce things we want. We try to be unique and to carry our integrity through everything we do. We look at the source and see what the motivation and philosophy is. Usually you make a connection before you even start to think about that, you know when you see something or when you talk to someone how they are about what they do. That's very important because it creates an energy in the store. It's definitely not about money, it's just about producing things.

It's incredibly rewarding when you walk in here and you can see the results of what you do,

you can see

the work and what you create is manifest -

there's literally mountains of soap everywhere.

I suppose that's how it started. I suppose it began with a dream really and grew from there.

Df It sounds like the energy or spirit hasn't changed much in that time and that what inspired you then inspires you still?

Carolyn I think because it's fulfilling, it's life-affirming, it continually goes around like that. It's incredibly rewarding and it's great when people call you and let you know that the products that you make have made a difference to their lives.

Df Did that start to happen fairly early on?

Carolyn Yes and it started to happen a lot. I've had cards from people who've actually done beautiful drawings and sent amazing thank you's saying how much they love the product especially when they've had skin problems or whatever, and you'll sit down and cry. It's amazing, you can't put it into words but it's very humbling that what you do can make that much difference. I guess people find us who have some kind of skin problem or who just want to buy something that isn't mass-

Photograph Saffrine Nydegger



produced and that they know that is made by hand.

Df So your initial intention wasn't to make a product that could be used by people with particularly sensitive skins or cured skin problems?

Carolyn Coming from a food background I was determined to use the best ingredients. It's a little bit like cooking. If I'm going to go out and cook something then I'm going to find the very best ingredients for it. If you do that with everything that you do, particularly with food or when making something like this, then the result is always going to be of quality and good. I put a huge amount of research into the creams and things that I make. They evolved, some out of my own needs because I have very sensitive skin. I am sensitive to fragrances and synthetic smells, they give me headaches, yet I can work in here all day long and not be affected. I think that because I have those troubles myself

it was something that I needed and I created for other people who needed it.

We've got a very small range and it hasn't increased at all in the last eight years. A lot of people ask me, 'What's going to be coming that's new?' and I say, 'Nothing, this is not a fashion trend.' If a clothing store wants to buy the products we certainly question them as to why they want to. Do they want to buy it because of how it looks or do they want to buy the product because they make a connection and it fits with where they're at? I often say no to people because I know it won't work. You've got to sell from a place where you connect with what you do, no matter what that is.

Df Have you learnt that through trial and error or was it some innate sense that you had that that was the way to do business?

Carolyn To follow the heart you mean?

Df Yip.

Carolyn I think that perhaps you realise with life experience what's important to you. If you live your life that way, and you trust your intuition and whatever comes up for you then you really truly follow your destiny and it leads you where you're meant to go. You don't have to intellectualise it, it's there. I mean it's always there for everyone, it's just that we get into our headspace too much about things. I think a lot of us know when

perhaps we're not in the right space, but we don't trust enough, or we're not brave enough, to act on that feeling

and see what happens. Perhaps that's luck for me, or however that came about. I had an incredibly rich childhood without knowing it. I was brought up in a pretty rural environment and brought up with lots of raw materials. My father had a hobby gold mine and he collected rocks and minerals. We spent our childhood wading up rivers looking for gemstones. I think that by doing lots of things that he loved to do and that he was passionate about it helped me learn the importance of that. It was something that was represented in my whole family. I could easily go back... I mean I'd love to study lots of things too and there's heaps of things I'd like to do apart from this, but you can climb up the rungs of a ladder and then find that it's

*To market, to market By Kate Bezar

Why, given the choice, would you brave the elements, stand on your feet for hours, have to wear a bum bag and put yourself through that first half hour when you fear the worst - that yours will be the only market stall without a single customer?

Admittedly I'm only behind the trestle at a market a couple of times a year, but it's a pretty fantastic one, the Melbourne Design Market and it's worth every second.

Dumbo feather doesn't have a retail presence of its own so these markets are the only chance I get to witness the utter confusion on people's faces when they first see a copy. Is it a... what is it? Dumbo what?

In the three years that I've been taking Dumbo feather to market,

I've gone from taking half a day to explain it (to each person), to being a little more succinct. I've become much better at understanding what each individual might like about it. It's not a sales pitch as such, well it kinda is, but to me it's more about understanding what it is about Dumbo feather that truly resonates with people. Having to go through that process with a flesh-and-blood potential reader has been absolutely invaluable.

Markets also provide the chance to meet existing readers. Out of the corner of my eye I see a tall guy wearing pretty funky glasses stop in his tracks, grab the arm of his girlfriend, wheel her around 180 degrees and make a beeline for my patch. It's

one of them! Brilliant. Of course it's fabulous for my ego to be told how great Dumbo feather is, but more than that, it's a chance to find out who our readers are and why they love it so. This is not a name and postal address, in fact it's even more than an email address, it's a real live person with a brain and a heart and a soul. This is what it's all about.

If you've got a product of any description there's a market for you whether the weekly organics market, the flea market in your local primary school's grounds, or a design market a couple of times a year. Dust off the '80s glitter dust from your bum bag and give it a go, you'll truly be amazed at how much you learn; the who, the what, the how and the why.

Photography by Sinean King





Photograph Saffrine Nydegger

not leaning against the right wall. If it's about money, or if it's about how you look, or it's about something external like that, then I think that you can get to the top rung and sometimes it works out for you but other times, although it might be fulfilling in one sense it certainly won't be in the heart sense. It depends how you live, but for me, I wear my heart on my sleeve. If I'm upset about something you'll see. If I'm happy about something you'll see. It's there all the time. I think I just follow along closely with how I feel. I don't know where Est is going, I don't sit down and make business plans and particularly worry about it. As I said before, I don't think I'll do what I do forever, I have lots of other things I'd like to do as well.

I could easily stop this tomorrow, not be disappointed, move on and do something else

like I love

gardening and growing things. For me that again is doing something with my hands and the earth.

Df Your ego isn't obviously tied up in being the founder of Est. I think that, if you can do it, that's a really healthy way to have a business.

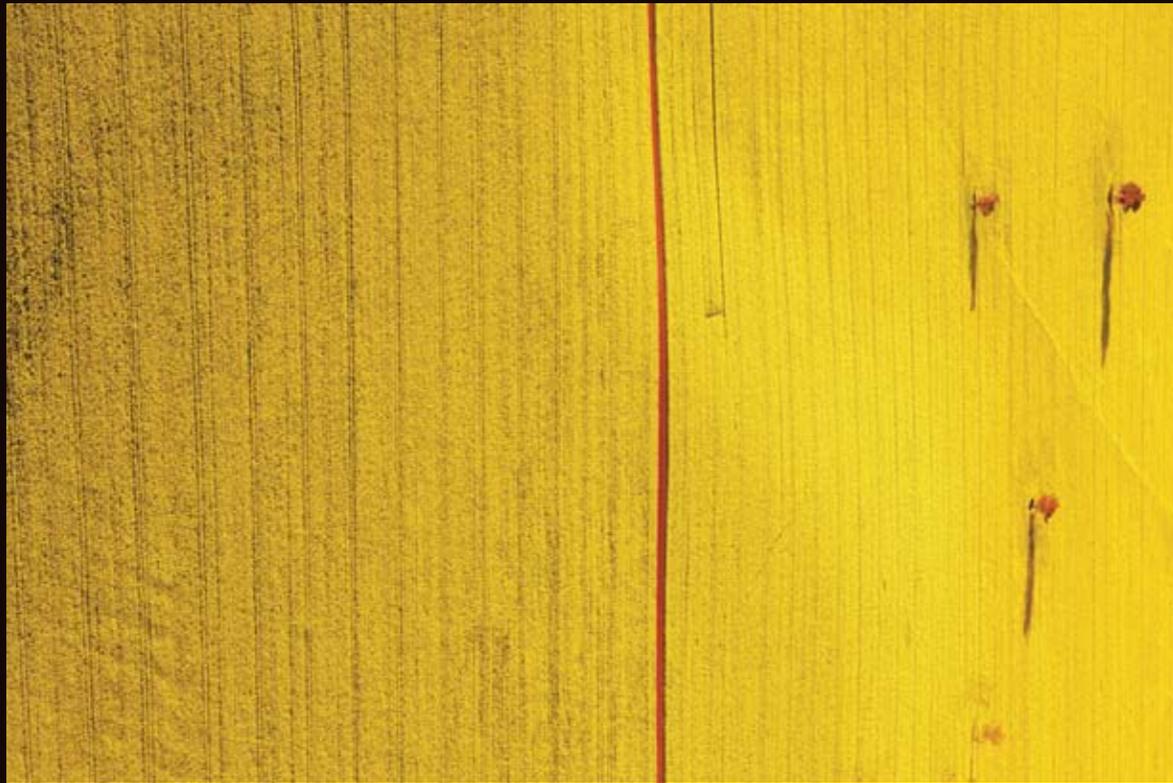
Carolyn Hopefully, although I do have to say that through November and December it was absolutely exhausting and I am one of those people who, if there's the demand... We had so many customers, mostly because we had a lot of media coverage via a programme called Postcards on one of the TV channels. They aired the programme twice and our phones didn't stop ringing. I like to deliver my goods to my customers the same week that they order so you can imagine what mode I went into - which was probably not the right thing to do. I started at 5:30am and finished at about 10:00 or 11:00pm for 21 days straight. I was absolutely burnt out, but when I'm serving my customers, I go into this mode of needing to serve them because that's what they need. It can get out of control and we're still trying to catch up. Most of our [wholesale] customers are small produce-related stores, olive groves - I love selling to those people, food-related environments, specialist stores, delis and people like that. Today we had an order that came in from a clothing store and normally we supply them with 10 units but this time they've ordered 150 of one, and 150 of another and 200 of another - that gets scary. I looked at Lisa and said, 'Oh well, there's some work to do tonight'. She panicked a bit but I said, 'Don't worry about it, it will happen, have some faith in yourself, people will wait, it's all right.'

Df If you can manage the customer's expectations you should be fine.

Carolyn And look, if someone comes along and is demanding then I'll say, 'I don't think what we do is right for you.' We do serve people very quickly but still, if there's something extraordinary that comes in then so be it. It just flows along. I've got two girls who work in here with me, one's been here for six years, and they all love their work. We have fantastic customers. I think that when you do something like this

you tend to attract like-minded people... We have great conversations in here.

I had a lady come in today who'd been in the flower industry for something like 12 years. She travelled overseas four times a year and so we were talking about anxiety and travelling and I was asking her how she coped. She was telling me all these stories about things that had happened to her, but she'd just been made



*Simply rich By Claire Thomas

When something is 'simple' we usually think of it as being clear, straightforward, understated, basic, plain even... certainly not rich. Yet the photographs that comprise one of Saffrine Nydegger's recent exhibitions titled 'Rich' are extraordinarily simple.

They are simple in their subject matter; crops in their first bloom across the fertile land around Junee, New South Wales (almost halfway between Sydney and Melbourne).

They are simple in their timing;

that period of just four or five days in July during which the crops turn such vibrant shades. Saffrine explains, there's "this glorious moment in nature which represents an intense example of colour saturation and perfect form."

They are simple in their composition, each capturing a single block of colour, only occasionally broken by a tractor or a sprinkling of trees. The landscape is deconstructed into shapes, lines, form, movement and colour in much the same way

that Aboriginal artists have been representing it for centuries. Saffrine believes that "this subtle deconstruction allows us to better appreciate the beauty of the landscape and the uniqueness of this transient moment – of crops in bloom."

They are simple in their execution, just a girl and a camera in a low-flying, crop-dusting Cessna piloted by "a local guy called Randall."

They are rich indeed.

www.saffrinenydegger.com

redundant. So I had a conversation with her about what happened to me and encouraged her to just stand in that space. She wasn't financially challenged so she could just sit and allow herself to do the things that she loves to do. It was lovely and an hour went by - I should really have been in the kitchen - but that's important. Really what makes it is the people. If you get too big you end up not even noticing who people are and it becomes a different business. Then you have to find people to work with you who understand where you come from and I don't think other people understand where I come from. How can you impart that to somebody else? It's very difficult. To understand what motivates me and what makes me go is quite hard. I think we'll just stay the way we are and if it gets to the point where I think it's too much then I'll move on and allow somebody else to take over. I'd be very careful about who takes it. I suppose you're writing this in the hope that it'll be an inspiration to others...

Df That's the idea.

Carolyn I've had people say, 'You really inspire me' when they come in and that's really nice because I'd love to... Maybe I am standing here being an inspiration, but I'd actually love to go out and teach people to be brave enough to stand in that space and really take the opportunity that they've been given and, instead of choosing to be miserable, choosing to do something that would give them some joy. It's not always something people can do either and

often in retirement you see people head off in a completely different direction.

They wait all their life to do something that they love to do. Like someone who's been an executive all his life will do something with his hands. I see that with the people that make things for me and they love it. I think sometimes all we need is a good dose of courage, that's all. I'm not saying I have it all the time, my friend was my courage. Perhaps we need to draw more on the support of others too because

we tend to stand alone sometimes and not ask for help when we need it.

You can't achieve everything you want to on your own, that's it. If we collectively inspired one another then we'd probably be better off.

Df Absolutely. What you do is also aesthetically very beautiful, how do you make it so?

Carolyn Again, when I buy something, I buy something because I love it. I am attracted to natural raw materials so what happens in the shop is that... The walls are lime-washed with a beautiful soft, pale, pale green, almost a cream and the floors are stone, an uncoated, matt, French limestone and that sets the base for all of these raw materials. There's very little colour and if it is then it's a natural colour, although there is a splash of red through here. In terms of textiles, it's cottons, and linens, and suede. Then there's the string balls in grey linen, and the string bags, and wooden buttons, and hand-thrown ceramics by one potter who does amazing jugs and things for us. There's enamel that's made in Romania and that's handmade as well. I think that you can put those things together... I live on a farm and we live in a half-renovated farmhouse and I've got a collection of all these things, but I don't worry too much about it. My home's comfortable, it doesn't look like a show home. I suppose for the shop I just buy things because I like them and

they fit together. I do tend to buy things with a common theme without really realising it. Again, I don't try to look like anything or anyone else. I don't go out into the world looking at what anyone else does. I refuse to be influenced by that. I want to be able to say that what I do is because I've chosen it or created it to be that way, not because I've copied anyone else. I do have a real problem with people copying the designs of others. I've seen it done in other businesses and I've also been on the receiving end of it with my products here at Est. But you know, there's no integrity there, so whilst it hurts and you feel perhaps for a short time a bit damaged by it, in turn it possibly sells my product down the track somewhere too.

Df I'm sure it does.

Carolyn So it's okay. People have to live with what they do. For me in here, I leave the farm, I drive straight to work, I exist in here for two or three days, then the only place I go is back home, I cross the road to the organic store to get supplies, I grow all my own fruit and vegetables, and I don't really go out there in the world. I don't know what goes on. The only things I do are I go to a gift fair once a year in August in Melbourne and I've been overseas twice to source things like string and flax particularly because we don't have a flax industry here. I had to go overseas for that so I went to France and Belgium and sourced what I needed. I may go back into Germany and into Scandinavia this year to have a look but I don't want to have too large an imported element.

*I want to represent
Australian artists and just craftspeople really who
use their skills to create things.*

I just want it to be unique that's all, I don't want what I do to be something that's been ripped off from somebody else because I know what it feels like. It's a small space and world that I live in; I'm either here or at home with my animals. That's not to say I haven't ever been out there. I love fashion and I love clothing and I love all these wonderful things, but I love good food and we go out and eat a lot. We've just been to Tasmania for a week, which is where I come from. We were touring all the way round and eating an abundance of beautiful food. That's the type of place we tend to head to, we camp and things like that. So maybe I've had both lives and I prefer this one.

*I have had the other, an existence
which was perhaps more material, but I wouldn't
choose anything other than this.*

Df And that's where you draw your inspiration from rather than trawling the internet or TV?

Carolyn No, we don't watch TV at home. We don't have television at all and we don't even have the internet connected there. We spend all of our time outdoors with horses or animals or whatever, or in the garden gardening. For me that's my release. I can't find time really to fit those other things in. We'll go out and see a movie occasionally, once a month or whatever, but it really is a simple life.

Df Simple but rich.

Carolyn Very rich (*see page 82 *Simply rich*). We love it. That's me, quite simple. ♡

Photograph: Saffrine Nydegger

