

BLUES



The Heart of the Land

September '10

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FEATURES

20. BUSH TELEGRAPH

The Alice Desert Festival, Birdsville Races, Yeppoon to Bundaberg bike ride and more will keep you entertained this month

28. TALKING TURKEY

This year's Brisbane Exhibition again featured the annual Red Meat Awards and a gumboot challenge for the kids

42. BUSHIES & BARONS

It's not easy creating a children's picture book, author Lyn Lawrence told those who attended the launch of her second tome

52. ON THE LAND

Four years after Cyclone Larry, Paul Smith and Boar Busters is still tackling the growing feral pig population

56. KICKING HEELS

A glimpse of Bush Christmas, the latest music with Bushy, Robyn's Book Reviews and your monthly dose of country humour

73. TRADER

Massey Ferguson, Sota, Case IH, and the Paul Feeny Group all bring new tractors and farm machinery to the Aussie market

REGULARS

- 4. Editorial
- 6. Your Say
- 8. Ya Reckon
- 20. Gone Bush
- 58. Country, Blues & Roots
Music with Bushy
- 60. Robyn's Books
- 62. Country Humour
- 71. Blue's Classifieds

SPECIAL FEATURES

- 65. Communications
- 66. Remote Power



NEXT ISSUE
OCTOBER
2010

Advertising Booking Deadline:
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Features:
• Tractors & Farm Machinery
• Rural Trucking



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Canadian imports Kim and Lesle Kanigan are delighting tourists and locals alike with their take on the old-fashioned sweet called a 'kiss', Paul Oliveri reports

As kids growing up in cane country we were never short of a sugar fix. All you needed was a pushbike to ride out to the nearest paddock and a bit of muscle to squeeze the juice from the stalk.

This Burdekin nectar was usually accompanied by a bucketload of cane fibres and an aftertaste from whatever had clung to the stalk last, but as kids this was the least of our worries.

Thirty years on and now living in suburban Cairns I've had to refine my taste to more socially acceptable and readily available sugar fixes.

Earlier this year, while interviewing for another story, I had the good fortune to stumble across Stillwater Sweets in Kuranda, between Cairns and Mareeba. Owned by Canadian imports Kim and Leslie Kanigan, Stillwater specialises in producing the old-fashioned sweet called a 'kiss'.

Using tonnes of food-grade raw sugar from the recently upgraded Mossman Mill, the couple produce a distinct version of the soft-textured kiss based on flavours of the north and ancient recipes.

"This area is full of cane fields; tourists drive past sugar cane, maybe do a mill tour then come up here for the finished product," Kim says.

Kim has gone as far as designing the sugarcane kiss, which has the natural raw sugar taste. "Tourists love it. They can take it home or send a little bit of the north to wherever they want. Many people have never seen sugarcane and for them it becomes a very regional and distinct experience," he says.

This distinct experience doesn't rest with tourists alone. Like many boutique or value-adding producers the Kanigans have interesting origins. Kim, a toolmaker by trade in Canada, decided to collect a Package Machinery Company (PMC) model-K kiss wrap machine.

PMC's model-K is the grandfather of sweet cutting and wrapping machines. "It cuts a single piece of wax paper from a roll and a single sweet, from a rope like length before wrapping it using a piano wire style set up. The model we have will wrap 120 kisses per minute and the tourists and locals are fascinated by the old-style machine," Kim says.

"In the US they were used from around 1913 to wrap chewing gum, saltwater taffy and penny candy. These machines are some of the finest examples of early mechanics and I had to get one.

"This first purchase of a 1930s vintage model-K led to an interest in both collecting and restoring the machines and producing our own sweets. There was only one problem, I needed to learn to cook."



A bucket of Australian kisses

"This area is full of cane fields; tourists drive past sugar cane, maybe do a mill tour then come up here for the finished product."

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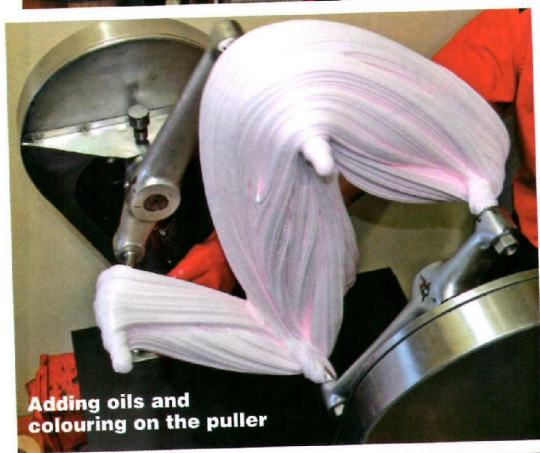
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Kim Kannigan feeding the sweet rope into the PMC model-K



Lesle Kannigan, packaging the finished product



Adding oils and colouring on the puller

“We’re like kids in a lolly shop”.

and kept putting more flavour and less sweet into the recipes till I was happy,” he says.

These recipes worked well until shifting to the other side of the world where humidity and temperature averages had no resemblance to Canada.

“I cook using an open copper kettle at very low temperatures. This means the sweets are affected by humidity and ambient temperature.

“We had some real disasters with test batches prior to learning to cook in Australia. The perfect days for us are those cool, dry days which can be a rarity in Far North Queensland,” Kim says.

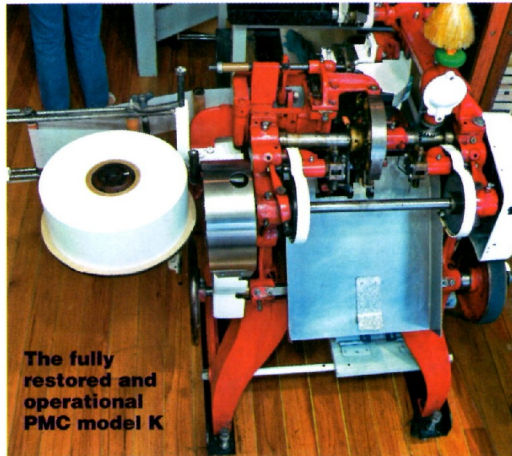
Apart from perfecting a recipe to suit the environment and the mechanics of the vintage model-K, this husband and wife team had a long list of modern considerations.

“Whether for health or personal choice a lot of people don’t want to eat animal products these days. For this reason all our recipes are vegan. We don’t use any artificial colours or flavours, eggs, dairy, gelatine, preservatives gluten, cholesterol, peanuts or soy, and they are 95 percent fat free and low in sodium,” Kim says.

“These are all ‘helpers’ which the majority of the

While still in Canada Kim sourced cookbooks from the 1890s-1920s to gain an insight into sweet production to suit the model-K and began experimenting.

“Everyone says things always tasted better in the past so I went back to those origins, but I found the recipes too sweet. I like flavour rather than sweetness



The fully restored and operational PMC model K

larger companies use to make it cheaper and easier to produce their sweets."

To produce the light and fluffy textured kisses Kim uses a second 1930s vintage machine, a puller to aerate the base mixture. This carefully controlled process introduces air into the mixture to give the desired texture while he adds the natural colours, flavours and fine natural oils.

"We have 21 flavours so we are constantly chasing our tails to keep up. While some of the traditional flavours like chocolate, strawberry and vanilla are popular, so too are some distinctly northern varieties.

"These include a Kakadu plum which has a really good sweet and sour balance and the quandong or rainforest blueberry which the tourists all know from learning about the cassowary.

"We have also produced more mainstream tropical flavours such as mango, lime, banana and pineapple," he says.

From a 10-kilogram batch Stillwater Sweets yields around 1,440 lollies under ideal weather conditions.

On average it produces between 6 and 10 batches per day, which adds up to a heck of a lot of lollies.

"At the moment I spend around 80 hours per week cooking, rolling out and wrapping the sweets," Kim says.

"All the wrapping is done in our shops (Cairns and Kuranda) where the public can watch and witness anything that goes wrong.

"It's a bit like dairy farming you have to be there all the time and as soon as you look away something will happen.

"Both Lesle and I are working full time on top of full time. We couldn't get any further round the world than where we have moved and it cost us plenty to do it but we couldn't be happier.



"We're like kids in a lolly shop".



Kim with the finished product

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