

Organic interlude

with Nici McLean (nee Andronicus)

» Nici McLean – former Australian triathlon champion, and current owner of ‘Organicus’ (specialising in organic soups, cereal and condiments) – is helping take organic mainstream, through the doors of the likes of Sumo Salads and Novatel Hotels. **Jaime Newborn** interviews Nici about what sparked her passion for certified organic and the ethos of eating.

ACOM: How did you first learn about organic and what convinced you to turn it into a career?

My husband was diagnosed with Adenoid Cystic Carcinoma of the Lacrimil Gland (Tear Gland) in early 2006. The medical options for treatment were limited and some doctors described them as barbaric. A resection of the area literally meant cutting half of his head away to try and eradicate the cancer. With five children to consider, we were very worried about the impact such radical surgery would have on them. I read a lot about natural therapies and the one subject that repeated again and again was organic food.

I stood in the kitchen with giant garbage bags and literally threw everything out. We went shopping at the local organic store and started a whole new way of eating.

On the medical side we eventually found a clinical study of Paul's cancer at Harvard University/ Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, USA. Paul's tumour was outside of the acceptable parameters for treatment and I persuaded Professor Liebsch there to take Paul on for the sake of our children – we had no other choice.

With a lifetime dedicated to sport, I was convinced of two things – Paul needed the optimal diet and exercise schedule while he was in Boston for three months so that he could take as much chemotherapy and radiation as they could deliver to him and have a chance at survival. Food and exercise were the only supporting programmes that Pr Liebsch would allow and Paul was totally focussed on eating only certified organic food.

Upon his return, Paul was very sick and by this time I had learnt enough to know that I would continue to provide organic food for my family in a hope that it might protect our health in the future. With an organic diet you tend to eat more slow-food style, natural and whole foods and these principles were worth hanging on to.

Unfortunately as Paul recovered we were limited in our sociable tendencies as a result of too few foodservice operators offering organic options on their menu. Organicus was created because we felt that we needed a back up plan to sustain our family in the event that Paul's treatment didn't work, but also to service what we perceived was a gaping hole in the market.



Is organic business or pleasure for you?

My hands are stained bright purple right now with the juice from beetroot – we're making beetroot chutney today and I'd swim in it if I could! It's the most divine soft texture, gorgeous vibrant colour and the flavour is to die for... how could this job not be a pleasure!

Seriously though, I develop the recipes and then the production is usually left to the kitchen team. I consider my responsibility as an operator in this industry as incredibly important. Like Paul, we may be feeding people every day whose health, maybe life, depends upon the integrity of the food they eat. I make it my mission to deliver the best nutrition in every product we deliver and sponge up all the information I can to improve what I produce every day.

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What convinced you to take organic to the ‘big boys’? How did you get a foot in the door and what were the results?

I think I really miss racing – I spent ten years of my life chasing victory in sport and perhaps I yearn for the challenge of racing the big titles!

While we may have a relatively young industry, we are certainly having an enormous impact on the major operators associated with food all around the world. The chiefs of successful and established companies are by nature thought leaders and change agents. They might be the ‘big boys’ but are searching for ways to improve their operations all the time – they will only remain at the top of their game while they pursue education. An educated view of organic food and how that fits into corporate sustainability is a very positive one.

Are there challenges to co-ordinating organic on a large scale and dealing with the corporate culture of large companies?

The usual response to this question would be that the limited supply of produce – and seasonality is tricky. The greatest challenge, however, is relevant to pricing. The true value of food is only understood with a thorough education and it’s very confronting negotiating your way through a contract where price is so sensitive. Big companies normally have enormous power to push pricing around and it is a constant theme in my every day.

Where would you like to see your business and the organic industry in the near future? What could help you along the way?

I would like organic food options to be treated like vegetarian and gluten free – most food outlets cater for these popular dietary considerations and there is no reason that organic food cannot be considered the same way. If you are looking for a quick meal on the go, travelling, shopping or out for a special meal, you should be able to choose organic!

To achieve this there are a few things the industry needs – MORE ORGANIC GROWERS to produce a diverse range of beautiful produce that is the genesis of everything we do – we’ll never achieve our grand plans of feeding Australians better food without growth within the most important part of the industry, the farming.

Do you think people are becoming more receptive to the ‘organic message’?

People take a personal decision to try organics for different reasons. Sometimes it is a health crisis or a choice based on ethical treatment of animals, sustainability, or avoidance of additives. Many just believe it tastes better. Some may be impacted by media headlines, but most organic consumers I have been in contact with have done their own research and put a lot of time and effort into creating their own opinion and won’t be easily impacted by criticisms.

I believe that increasingly supportive attitudes towards organics is led by the groundswell of interest in two key principles: ethics and sustainability... certified organic food is such an easy fit with these principles.

What has inspired you and what keeps you inspired?

People inspire me every day, but I have had the most incredibly inspirational woman in my life. My grandmother grew up during the Great Depression and became a widow with six young children in the 50’s. My mum was the eldest child at 14 years old and they struggled through some very tough times, often surviving on the generosity of neighbours. Now almost 80, Nan has been suffering terribly with Parkinsons’ Disease for more than a decade. She has had an incredibly tough life, but she NEVER complains. I am truly proud of my Nan, inspired by her determination and in awe of her endless love and compassion.

Do you have any words of encouragement or wisdom for other organic business owners?

Organics is so important - never forget that millions of people every year are diagnosed with life threatening diseases and many choose organics for the purity and nutrition. Be proud that we are providing a choice. ◆◆

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