

Starting from Scratch

Jane and Mark Yellowley tossed away their urban careers to build a booming chain of bakery-bistros on the rural Sunshine Coast.

By Carol Pope » Photography by Nik West

DIGGING INTO RASPBERRY cake hot from the oven at their seaside home in Robert's Creek, the happy chatter of six-year-old Brianna and four-year-old Maren in the background, Jane and Mark Yellowley reflect on the journey that led them here.

Before chucking it all in 13 years ago to launch a chain of "everything-made-from-scratch" bakery-bistros on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast, the couple lived in the heart of Vancouver where they worked as managers for Capers Community Market, a chain of natural food stores.

While they recall "good things" about living in the city – "we could rollerblade right from our apartment door" – the pair found themselves pining for a more rural experience. "Whoever finished first on Friday would pack the camping box and pick up the other after work," says Mark.

"I remember us sitting in Gibsons on the water grumbling 'We don't want to go home!'" laughs Jane. "And then we asked 'Why do we need to come here just on weekends?'"

It was a revelation for them both. Researching where they could live but still commute by ferry to their jobs, they opted for a small house in Robert's Creek. Once settled, they climbed doggedly to the next tier of their dream.

"At Capers, we had really learned a whole philosophy of food: scratch, organics, a whole-foods approach," adds Mark. "Here on the Coast there was no scratch baking, no one using organic flour but, at the same time, a growing demand for it."

Jane approached a number of coffee shops to ask the question: Would you like to receive fresh baking? The answer was a resounding, "Yes!" She learned to create a business plan at a workshop sponsored by Community Futures, part of a provincial network of economic development agencies supported by various local credit unions.

Now all they needed was a company name: "A friend suggested 'Wheatberries', which we really loved," says Mark. "We use wheat and we use berries and the wheatberry is what you mill

into flour. It's also a seed that, given love and attention, will grow into something."

The budding company now had everything but a workspace: "We had to rent commercial kitchens from other businesses once they were finished for the day," recalls Mark. "We would sneak in and work right through the night." Jane adds. "Every night and morning we had to pack up all our little utensils, all our ingredients. We'd start at 10 p.m. and deliver our baking up and down the coast at 6 a.m., driving home with the truck windows open to stay awake."

In 1998, the couple took a leap of faith and upgraded their home to a property that could be zoned for business. Adding a commercial kitchen, they experimented with weekend retail sales in addition to their wholesale production.

Once the word was out, their "little cedar building in the woods" became a madhouse with a dozen cars lined up before the doors opened. From there, the couple launched their first store in Gibsons, added coffee to the menu and the first Wheatberries bakery-bistro was born. Locations in Sechelt and Langdale followed. Finally, in 2007, the Yellowleys purchased a large building in Gibsons that they upgraded to a flagship store.

"The **Sunshine Coast Credit Union** in Gibsons was very supportive in giving us the financing for that building." Mark is quick to point out that the credit union stood by them even as the renovations racked up more costs than anticipated. "If we hadn't had that support, I'm not sure how we would have made it!"

Increasingly busy with their booming business and growing children, the couple recently decided to sell franchise rights for their Sechelt and Langdale locations to a longtime employee who is "like family" and to a "lovely, dynamic Gambier-Island couple."

"Just as we were getting the seed for this idea in our heads, we were approached by them," says Jane. "You know how that happens? You commit yourself to a process and things just fall into place." **E**

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