



Wombah Coffee Plantation

PEOPLE

Joan Dibden and Joy Phelps

[Pioneers of coffee growing in NSW]

Many people are unaware that coffee grows commercially in Australia and fewer would know that it was a couple of retirees who pioneered the Australian coffee growing industry in New South Wales.

Following successful careers as a pathologist and nurse, the somewhat eccentric Joan Dibden and Joy Phelps, decided to do something different to occupy their time in retirement. Little did they know then, they were destined to be famous not only for their extraordinary personal and professional achievements, but for a considerable number of 'firsts' in the Australian coffee industry.

Early last year, Nat Byron called to ask if I'd help write their story. Shortly afterwards however, on 20th September, Joan lost a brief battle with cancer. It came as a shock, as just prior, Joan and Joy were enjoying a trip to India. So it was with great sadness, but with much celebration of a life well lived, with a small group from the local coffee community, I attended her funeral the following week. Over a cup of coffee afterwards, we sketched out this story.

PEOPLE - Joan Dibden and Joy Phelps



People



Coffee had arrived in Sydney with the first fleet, and since then, various individuals had experimented with growing it around the Clarence, Richmond and Tweed Rivers in the Northern Rivers region. On Wolbin Island in the Clarence River, John Bale experienced some commercial success for a brief period of time until the 1920s. Also in 1897, plantings had began at the government-owned Wallingbah Experimental Farm near Lismore.

Nearly 100 years later, it was Joan and Joy who were ultimately recognised as the first to experience long-lasting success in the commercial production of coffee in the Northern Rivers area of NSW – just behind Nat and Linda Jacques who started Jacques Coffee in Far North Queensland in 1979.

Settling in a tiny town called Wombah on the Clarence River, they started what's possibly the southern-most coffee plantation with any success in the world. It's often said that 'what this area lacks in altitude, it makes up in latitude with its cooler climate', busting the myth that good coffee must be high ground.

Joan and Joy started by gathering seedlings from under trees in the area, including those on Wolbin Island – chosen because they'd already adapted to the local climate, so would do well. They planted the first ones in 1982, and before long had reached maximum capacity for their property with 1,100 fruit bearing trees – a viable amount

for a small commercial operation.

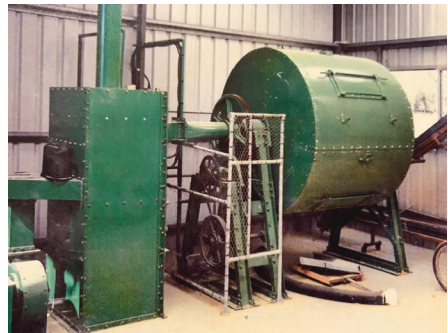
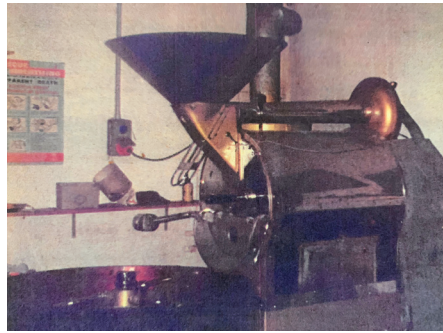
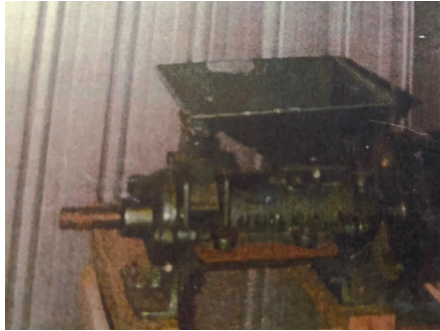
In the early years of Wombah Plantation, it was a lot of hard work and a steep learning curve. Their first crop in 1985 was so small, it could fit into a bucket!

But their dream for Wombah was more than a plantation. A processing plant, roastery and cafe were eventually added. You could also say they had the first 'crop-to-cup' coffee business in Australia – with Joan in charge of the farm and Joy in charge of the cafe.

Because the soil was mostly clay and poorly drained, they lost a lot of the early trees. Learning that coffee trees like well-drained soil, with a pick and shovel, they dug a large drainage system around the property. They fed and nurtured the trees, mowed in between the rows and removed weeds by hand. The only thing they ever used for pests was white oil. They pruned the trees themselves for ease of harvesting. Processing was done with the aid of basic machinery that often broke down.

They read everything they could access from around the world on how to grow, process and roast coffee and did courses at the local technical college in welding and metalwork to be able to make and repair their own machines.

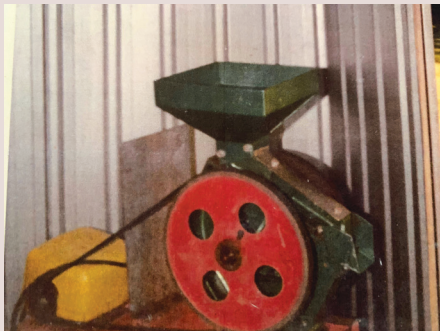
In 1988 a grant of \$44,000 from the Australian Trade Commission saw their business grow to the



PEOPLE - Joan Diben and Joy Phelps



Pioneers





next level. Part of this was used to travel to the plantations in Kona, Hawaii, an area with a similar climate, to research growing and processing methods. The remainder went towards building and equipping a processing plant, that was ultimately used for processing berries from 50 other growers in the area as well as their own.

At the same time, the local government put forward one of the biggest obstacles to their early efforts – a connection to water for the new processing plant for which they would be charged \$26,000. But Joan and Joy were not only pioneers, they were innovators and problem solvers. As they'd done before with any obstacle, they also sorted this one out in their own do-it-yourself style, thereby avoiding the fee.

Priding themselves in doing the farming, processing, roasting and running the cafe themselves, even in their 80s, they did eventually get help with the harvesting. They were among the many growers in the area who employed pensioners from Sydney to help with hand harvesting.

They were known for being suspicious of any machines such as mechanical harvesters and driers. Adamant that sun drying on raised beds was preferable, for example, they believed this gave a better result than mechanical drying for the Clarence River Bourbon they initially grew. They liked to call their coffee 'gourmet', a word

that echoes 'specialty'. Nat Byron says, 'They were true artisans with flavour, at a time before specialty coffee was ever mentioned in Australia'.

By 1992 they were producing too much for their own cafe, so Rob Forsythe, a coffee roaster from Sydney came forward and bought any excess they had each year. They were eventually to encourage other locals to get into coffee growing, and for a small fee, they processed and roasted their harvest for them. They tried to start a co-operative, but quickly found it was a model that wasn't going to work in Australia. Joan also taught many of the farmers in the area how to roast, including Nat Byron who now has a very successful crop-to cup business himself.

With Joy as the first president, they started the NSW Coffee Growers Association, which was to become the Australian Sub-Tropical Coffee Association in the late 1990s. They worked tirelessly in the early years to successfully build a community around this association, writing its first newsletters and encouraging others to join a Coffee Tasting Group they'd also started.

Joan and Joy were ahead of their time with their focus on flavour – always tasting to assess why they achieved a certain result and what they had to do to make a change. This was an important lesson they taught other local growers and one of the most significant contributions they made to the industry.



Jan Ford who has known Joan and Joy for nearly 30 years and was part of their Coffee Tasting Group for years, says, 'Joan and Joy always had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve with growing coffee and this was to produce exceptional quality in their end product. In everything they took on and everything they came up against, they fought to achieve a great tasting cup of Australian coffee.'

At a time when all the coffees entered into the Sydney Royal Easter Show were imported, they were the first to enter Australian coffees. Winning many medals in blind tastings, this gave world recognition to Australian coffees. Later they became judges on the tasting panels of the Sydney Royal Easter Show and their significant contribution to the industry over several years as judges was very much appreciated and respected.

Everything I've read or heard points to a couple of ladies who had an enthusiastic zest for life, an unstoppable spirit and an enormous sense of humour. In the words of Zeta Grealy, a fellow coffee grower and judge at the Royal Easter Show 'Joy and Joan always created a warm and funny side to life. Meeting up with them was a treat, and I was never quite sure what to expect, apart from knowing I would end up laughing.'

All in all, Joan Dibden and Joy Phelps are recognised as trailblazers who were never afraid of hard work and the many obstacles that came

their way. They drove developments in coffee production, ensuring the small community of Wombah and the unique coffees they produced would take their rightful place in Australian coffee history.

Author Christine Cottrell

Christine is a widely travelled coffee enthusiast with a passion for writing and photography. She's the author of the BARISTA BIBLE (now in its 2nd edition) and the PERFECT ESPRESSO Training System – a series of books and training materials now selling globally. Her latest series is TRENDING CAFES Brisbane & Beyond, featuring 100 cafes with a free coffee at each one if you own a book.

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