

# handmade cordial

Story: Victoria Cosford

Photo: John Bortolin

If limes seem to contain the essence of a tropical summer — tangy, spicy, cooling — then it is a tropical summer that Jane Boniface has captured in her Rancho Cordial. I have driven out to her 33-acre farm at the back of Corndale, swung in off a by-road at the Rancho Relaxo sign, and joined her out on the veranda where a delicately tinkling wind chime stirred by the light breeze is the only sound we can hear. Fields fall away all around us, mountains rear up, there's an old Kombi in the yard and an atmosphere of comfortable, sprawling calm.

For a Cairns-born girl who left school at 14, Jane has packed a lot into her life thus far — although she suggests that it is here, where she and partner Jose have been living for the past ten years or so, that she might have finally settled. Running restaurants in Port Douglas, playing the stock market and exporting fish from the Barrier Reef to big aquariums all over the world were just some of the careers in her eclectic life.

It was while she was in Cairns that she met Jose, a Spanish circus performer — or 'Big Top man', as Jane calls him. She had been in the process of deciding where to move and was strongly considering somewhere down south, close to Byron Bay. Over the years living in Cairns had introduced her to a sector of the population who spent winters in Byron Bay: they were, she tells me, 'a great group of people'.

So, in mid 2002, the couple started looking for places to live, the chief requirement being that the area was flat enough to accommodate Jane's horse and Jose's two trucks, prime-mover and massive caravan. 'Jose had never owned a house before', she says, 'always on the move with the shows. He'd never chopped the wheels off the caravan before.' They had almost given up when they were shown the farm. 'It had been on the market for three years', Jane tells me. 'Other people with farm experience had looked at it and seen how much work there was. We took it on because we knew nothing!'

There were about 300 lime trees on the property, trees already twenty years old. There were also stone fruit, mandarins and custard apples, so for a while Jane and Jose were picking fruit and dropping it off at Alstonville's The House With No Steps. They also joined a citrus group supplying limes to a major supermarket. 'Jose and I were doing the whole lot — so we learnt real quick', Jane tells me. 'We kept thinking how mad we were. I'd retired at 35!'

And yet the couple was wanting an activity which they could both manage. They discarded the prospect of macadamias, got rid of the stone fruit and threw themselves into the citrus. They added another

500 lime trees, planted 50 lemon trees, added other varieties of mandarins. Right from their first year Jane had been making her lime cordial. It started with a recipe she unearthed in an old beast-feeding mother's book and initially she was just whipping up batches for friends. Then one of them suggested she start bottling it. That first recipe resulted in a cordial which only lasted about two weeks, so Jane developed her own. 'I wanted to keep it with no additives or preservatives in it whatsoever — and that was hard', she says. 'I didn't want a sweet lime drink nor one too sour — I had to get that happy medium that would appeal to everybody.' Another friend in Sydney, a food scientist, agreed to do all the testing; eventually the recipe was perfected to their mutual satisfaction.

Jane and Jose had had a stall at the Byron Farmers Market since 2003, mainly selling their mandarins. When customers kept asking them if they had anything else to sell, 'the pressure was on', says Jane. She decided to introduce her lime cordial, naming it Rancho after the farm. And, 'it's sold itself from Day One', she tells me. 'I've never had anyone do any marketing for us. It sells out.'

As demand for it grew, the couple realised they had to make it all year round. Jose, apart from being the taste-tester, is the juicer, processing 200 — 300 kilos of limes at a time, generally half a day's work. This is done in the beautiful citrus juicer they bought from Valencia in Spain — the height of a man, it stands in the small factory adjoining the homestead. Over a kilo of limes — about fifteen in all — go into every bottle of cordial. For every single batch (fourteen bottles in total) Jane will make up a sugar syrup. 'I do so many batches', she laughs. 'I do four or five at a time. I'm making up to ten dozen a week, especially in summer! I do this so that it's exact every time — the sugar syrup is exactly the same every day.'

She is confident that it is this consistency which is one of the reasons for the popularity and the success of the product. Since 2006 it has been winning Silver, Bronze and Gold medals at both the Royal Sydney and Hobart Fine Food Shows. And now the awards are coming in for their mandarin cordial. For years they had sold the freshly squeezed juice from their Honey Murcott mandarins, so Jane thought she would 'give it a go'. Blending the intensely sweet mandarin juice with a little lime juice ('it gives it that nice clean finish') she came up with a product which apparently blew the judges away at the 2006 Sydney Fine Food Awards. 'We got a Silver', Jane says. 'I rang up and said — Are you sure? And I was told that we had only just missed out on a Gold! This year, however, their mandarin cordial managed to snare that Gold.'

And yet the couple have no desire to grow much larger, preferring to 'tick along, happy to do it for a nice lifestyle and make our farm viable', Jane tells me. It's just local distribution and three farmers' markets and they continue to do everything themselves, despite requests by gourmet delis and orders from countries like Sweden and Japan. 'It would become a money thing', Jane explains, 'instead of a product thing. It's a lot of hard work, but I am passionate about making a good product. I'd rather keep it small. It was dealing with our customers that got us to go organic (all of their products are chemical-free). The same people who bought it on Day One are still buying it today.'

