



Dr Moni Lai Storz is an unconventional nut farmer in Buxton with an interesting backstory.

How did Moni end up with a hazelnut farm in Buxton?

By Emily Friedel

You may have driven past the Hans Hazelnuts Farm sign on your way into Buxton and wondered about it. The woman behind (and on) the sign is probably not what you expect.

Dr Moni Lai Storz is many things, but she is certainly not your average nut farmer. She holds a PhD in sociology, which focused on the sociology of mental illness, and she lectured at Monash University for 27 years. She is also the founder of both the Australasian Centre of Chinese Studies and the Australasian Chinese Theatre Company. Restaurant owner, playwright, and author of several books add to the long list of Moni's accomplishments. After her long stint in academia, she became a sought-after expert in cross-cultural business communication, teaching Westerners

how to be more effective when dealing with Asian businesses.

Moni describes herself as a member of the Chinese diaspora (people who identify as Chinese based on their language, ancestry, or place of birth but live outside of China). Her parents were born in what was then known as British Malaya, now known as Malaysia.

"The poor and the hungry came from China to British Malaya way back in the 19th and 20th centuries. My paternal grandfather died, but my paternal grandmother brought up probably nine or ten children – I can't remember, I think a couple died – so she taught her children, like my father, to make wooden clogs. Wooden clog making was one of the specialised trades of the *Hakka* people of China. The *Hakka* people were and still are the gypsies of China," Moni says.

In 1963, Moni arrived in Australia to attend university.

"My Chinese name is Lai Suan Tin. The Immigration Department pre-arranged accommodation for me and put me in the YMCA. So when this young man was sent to meet me at Essendon airport to take me to the YMCA, he was stunned to see a little 19-year-old girl with a Jackie Kennedy hairstyle and in a *cheongsam* [a figure-hugging traditional Chinese dress with side slits]. I said, 'Do I look like a boy?' And then, from afar, I saw my cousin with two of his friends coming towards me, so I told the young man to go: 'Don't worry, my cousin will take care of me.' The Aussie boy was so relieved and scuttled away!"

And there began Moni's life in Australia and her academic career.

But how on Earth did such a woman, ►

now on the cusp of 80 years old, end up with a hazelnut farm in Buxton?

The name of the farm holds a clue: Hans is Moni's late husband, and it was his passing after 42 years of marriage that prompted her to buy the farm. A decision that she says took a matter of minutes.

"In 1997, I resigned from Monash as a lecturer and ran my cross-cultural consultancy full time. Three years later, my husband, who was a doctor (a radiologist) walked in and said, 'I've got cancer, and I'll be dead in 18 months.' He died in exactly 18 months, just as he predicted, before his 60th birthday.

"When we were first married and throughout our marriage, he had told that he had always wanted a farm because his happiest memories were on a farm as a boy in Sydney. Then 18 years after he died – it took me a while – I was driving around, and I thought it was about time. Then one day, I just found this farm, I walked in, I saw the roses, and the roses have a lovely story for me. My mother's name was Rose because she was the first girl to ride a bicycle in her little town in British Malaya in the 1930s. The night that Hans died I was fiddling with a rose in a vase. His bed was behind me as I was re-arranging the rose on a table. I turned around and

noticed that he had stopped breathing. Roses meant a lot to me. So I bought this farm in ten minutes."

For Moni, the farm is her "personal hobby farm" and "sanctuary"; she doesn't consider it a business. But that hasn't stopped her efforts to return the orchard – around 2,000 trees on 23 acres – to its former glory after it fell into disrepair during the covid lockdowns. With support from the local people in Buxton and a megaphone to scare off the cockies, there has been steady progress over the last 18 months. Whether or not you see any of the farm's hazelnuts, chestnuts or black walnuts for sale locally this autumn will be ➤



The eye-catching sign out the front of Moni's farm, featuring her smiling face alongside that of her late husband, Hans.



Moni walking through a section of chestnut trees in the orchard – an activity that is punctuated with frequent stops to yell and wave her hat at the cockies who are eating her crops.

dictated by many factors, including the efficacy of the megaphone. Moni seems happy to go with the farm flow.

“It will depend on how many nuts we’ve got! It’s kind of very casual – if it was a real business, I’d be too stressed out,” Moni says.

Moni, whose gregarious nature is immediately apparent, also seems happy to have visitors to show around and engage in lively conversations. However, her approach to farmgate operations diverges from the seasonal

pick-your-own openings offered by the previous owners. While Moni has a few private groups she has “inherited” come for pre-booked day trips to the orchard during summer, visits for other members of the public happen more informally. If you get in touch with Moni on Facebook and she takes a shine to you, you might just get invited to the farm.

“Guests are by invitation at the moment. Because I have the Facebook Page, you can contact me if you want to get hazelnuts or hazelnut seedlings.”

If you do have the pleasure of visiting Hans Hazelnut Farm, there is much more than hazelnuts to harvest. Moni has cultivated in herself a rich diversity of knowledge and experiences. So be sure to pack a bag for the nuts and an active, curious mind to stock up with food for thought.

To get in touch with Moni, search for “Hans Hazelnuts Farm” on Facebook or text her on 0419 367 261. Moni’s books can be found on the Australasian Centre of Chinese Studies website at www.accschinese.com



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