

# The secret to keeping rural towns alive



**Seeking inspiration:**  
Castlemaine author Kerry Anderson with her new book *Australian Rural Entrepreneurs*.  
Picture: YURI KOUZMIN

Bold business people are helping to keep country towns thriving, and those with a certain entrepreneurial flair have shared tales that can inspire others, writes **SARAH HUDSON**

**H**AVING written a book titled *Australian Rural Entrepreneurs*, Kerry Anderson makes a surprising admission.

"I hated the word entrepreneur. I used to cringe when I heard it," says the Castlemaine author, referring to the Americanisation of the word and its Silicon Valley connotations.

"But now I've written two books where I use the word and I see entrepreneurs are people who are always exploring ideas, almost an obsessive curiosity, who generate enthusiasm and energy, who think differently and are open-minded to new possibilities."

For the past six years Kerry – whose first book was titled *Entrepreneurship: It's Everybody's Business* – has traversed the back roads interviewing the nation's most inspiring country

from home and choosing to do so in the regions.

Kerry had to pivot when she initially sent the final draft to the publisher last February. Once COVID-19 struck she rewrote or added information to many chapters.

"Even before COVID, I wrote in the introduction, there's never been a better time to become a rural entrepreneur," she says, referring to internet connectivity. "COVID has highlighted to everyone that it is possible to live and work remotely. So what I've been banging on about for six years people can now see."

Kerry describes herself as a business woman, not an entrepreneur.

She grew up in Castlemaine, the daughter of parents who ran an earthmoving company.

"Kids of families who run small businesses get a good start in life,



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entrepreneurs.

The new book is divided into 12 chapters named after entrepreneurial traits, alongside case studies and tips.

In the opportunistic chapter, there's Bundarra Berkshires from Barham, NSW, a business that advises "be aware of new opportunities to improve your business and be prepared to change and adapt."

In the passionate chapter there's a case study on the Camel Milk Co Australia, from Kyabram, whose tips include "don't doubt yourself and be a problem solver."

In courageous, there's a profile on Mount Mitchell Homestead, in Victoria's northwest, whose story illustrates "just do it and have fun", while "taking sensible risks and giving back to the local community".

Kerry says in compiling the range of case studies from across ages, sectors and genders, she wanted readers — particularly other businesses — to learn from these diverse stories, often set against the backdrop of adversity.

"The people and stories in the book make others stop and think, I could do this," she says.

"In one, I interview a Bacchus Marsh nursery and you might think there's nothing special about that, but then you read that it's been operating for three generations and they have had to change directions in that time, such as drought. When they look back, there's lots of learnings."

She says the main theme to emerge from the book is avoiding complacency. "You can have a successful business, but you can't rest on your laurels."

Such pivoting has been perfectly demonstrated during COVID-19, Kerry says.

As damaging as the pandemic has been to the economy, in many ways it has given a boost to rural start-ups, not least because many are now working

whether its answering the phone, or fuelling machines. We were very aware as children that in order to spend money you had to earn it."

She went on to work in the public and private sectors, including Castlemaine Bacon (now Don KR), working in PR at Castlemaine Hospital and then running a stock and poultry store.

It was while working for a decade in the Loddon Murray community leadership program that she saw a gaping vacuum in rural towns.

"I'd drive through rural towns and see some were doing well and others not. Why were some doing well? Because they had a few vibrant businesses," she says.

"It's not enough to be great at agriculture or have one big industry. You've got to have a diverse range of businesses."

In the mid-2000s Kerry self-funded about four trips to the US to study rural entrepreneurship, visiting successful entrepreneurs and conferences.

In 2015 she started her consultancy, Operation Next Gen, where she travels around rural Australia giving talks, holding workshops and mentoring communities.

And every town she passes through there's always an entrepreneur who catches her eye, so she decided to write *Australian Rural Entrepreneurs* because it's a "powerful, authentic way" to demonstrate the importance of small business in country towns.

"Rural people won't describe themselves as entrepreneurial or even successful because they're too busy with what they're doing," she says.

"I had to convince some people to appear in the book, because they don't want to blow their own trumpet, but once I told them it was about sharing the knowledge for other towns, they were happy to join in."

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