PLANT

GROW

HARVEST

REPEAT

- FOOD FOR THOUGHT -

As parents, we’re always considering the needs of our family and how we can provide the best for them. Most of our decisions and actions are made to ensure they are always safe and sound, sheltered, clothed, educated, emotionally stable, well fed and blessed with good physical and mental health.

Whilst we all understand clearly that the foods we eat have a significant impact on supporting our good health and that, in theory, the better we eat, the better our health will be, we sometimes underestimate the responsibility on our shoulders to ensure that the foods we eat best cater for our entire family’s physical, mental and emotional needs.

There will always be ongoing challenges we face making sure the near-perfect meal is delivered to our table each night for our loved ones, but do we realise how significant these challenges can impact on our own mindset?

Many issues around the sourcing, quality, origins and value of the foods we eat depend on varying factors, such as:

- the extent of our knowledge about the foods we eat

- how such food has been grown, produced and manufactured

- how far our food has travelled

- how fresh our food actually is

- how much time we realistically have to source and prepare food

- the financial budget we have available to spend

- the nutritional needs of our loved ones

- how sustainable our food practices are

- the amount of food we inadvertently waste

- the cost of such waste to our back pocket; and

- the cost of such waste to our environment.

Our own personal values, needs, demands and resources will differ, so this is not a one-size-fits-all book to save your world. Rather, it’s a guide designed to help make your life that little bit easier and maybe even open your eyes to a world of good food you never knew could exist in your own everyday life.

This book serves to highlight different ways in which you can better support you and your family when it comes to sourcing food and the incredible benefits in doing so.

You may be surprised at how some simple changes in your current food practices will impact dramatically on your entire thought process, as well as your time. With some commitment and motivation to your cause, you will be rewarded with greater support from your family in your daily food challenges. The benefits are many and the outcome will most certainly exceed your expectations.

Food should never be considered a means to an end, but an opportunity to celebrate. Food is a way to reconnect with family and friends. Food fuels your body, your mind and your soul. Food is most times part of a celebration and eating good food is a real reason to celebrate.

Food is an art form and the care and love that infuses food should be part of the ritual of bringing food to the table.

Food is the reason why we exist, but good food is critical for our survival.

As a parent, too often food conjures up feelings of stress and anxiety in our already hectic lives. No matter what we do in our day, we’re all time-poor and, at some point, food preparation can be a challenge. Yet, every single day, humans rely on having very easy access to at least three meals a day.

Unfortunately, we’ve become so disconnected with the foods we eat that food has lost its meaning and purpose. Somewhere along the way, real food disappeared and in its place appeared products that resemble food as we knew it to be, but with ingredients that have names we don’t recognise, numbers to identify them and percentages that shouldn’t be necessary to justify their existence in that food in the first place.

Good food – real food – should grow from the ground, be reared in paddocks or swim in the sea.

Ingredients should not be discovered in science labs in test tubes and undergo rigorous testing before determining it is fit for human consumption.

When you think about how fundamentally important the role of food plays in our lives, its safe to say that overall, food is not treated with the respect it deserves. Because it’s so readily available, we tend to take it for granted. In the process, food has changed and now has lost its identity.

In order to bring food back into our lives and give it the hero status it deserves, we must understand the benefits of including quality food in our diet and realise the importance in doing so if we want to get the most from our healthy bodies and minds.

More importantly, we owe it to our kids to give them a sound and stable foundation on which to build their own strong, healthy lives

As parents, we all want the best for our kids and we want to be around for a long, healthy time to watch them grow and blossom into remarkable human beings. After all, we created them and have a great impact on how they evolve into their own selves. Food plays a fundamental role in this process and, like any job we undertake, there are days when we just want a break from what may seem like our own version of ‘Groundhog Day’ and just not have to worry or think about food.

We therefore need to find ways to release ourselves from the constraints and pressures of delivering good food to the table every day and turn it into the one of the most engaging and exciting parts of our day.

This book will show you how it can be done.

**Before we go on ...**

Before we delve deeper into this book, I want to share my own personal thoughts as a parent with you.

I am a mother of three growing boys always trying to work out how to provide the best for my kids with the resources our family has readily available to support them as individuals, and within our family.

I am not a qualified nutritionist, nor am I an expert child psychologist (except with my own kids – I always know exactly what they’re thinking). I am a parent who, like all parents, wants to know that I did the best I could for our children and enjoy watching them grow and evolve into strong, happy, healthy adults.

I want to know that the life lessons I shared with them throughout their childhood inspired them to become conscientious individuals, who care about the world they live in and show utmost respect for our natural world and the environment. I teach them to always show compassion and find personal reward in giving to others less fortunate, expecting nothing in return other than the feeling of positivity and gratitude that comes with giving more than receiving.

I hope that my own passion for food – growing food, preparing food, connecting with others through food and understanding where our food comes from – rubs off onto them in such a way that their own childhood experiences have been positive and have a profound impact on them, so that they will do the same with their own kids one day.

Finally, I want them to understand that food is life – a celebration. Good food inspires a positive way of living and it nourishes the mind, the body and the soul. Food brings people together in so many wonderful ways and the act of growing food enables us to nurture the environment and respect our amazing world.

I want my kids to remember me as a mum who was fun – a mum who was always there for her kids, who taught them to respect themselves first and be respectful of others. I want them to remember that their happiness, safety, health and wellbeing were my top life goals. I hope that my actions, passions and stories inspire them to find their own passions, create their stories and to make some positive noise by their own actions.

No matter what they do in life, they must learn to respect the world they live in and contribute positively in some way. Our world is precious and, as parents, we have an obligation to teach our kids to respect and protect our amazing planet.

We are all busy people and most of us probably wish for that eighth day in the week no one else gets. Despite the fast paced lifestyles we’ve inadvertently created for our kids, there are many ways to enjoy time together as a family through the love of food.

By doing so, you’ll realise how that quality time spent together can not only enhance the relationship with your kids but also your family’s connection with your food.

- INTRODUCTION -

As a small child, one of my earliest memories was watching my father work in our garden. He did all the typical gardening stuff – weeding, pruning, mowing the lawn and planting the flowering annuals - anything from petunias, violas, impatiens, marigolds and nasturtiums.

Across the front of our four-bedroom vanilla brick home in the leafy suburbs of Melbourne, we had a collection of magnificent roses. When in bloom, their scent was intoxicating and their display across our front garden was incredible. Even at a young age, I was very proud of my Dad’s roses.

In our backyard, there was an eclectic mix of trees, shrubs and plants that didn’t seem to make sense in their collection but, for me, they were the perfect sum of our family’s backyard.

Of these trees, I had two favourites. One was the tallest tree I’d ever seen in my very short lifetime – a tree we would climb as high as we dared and spend hours on end playing, hiding and creating our imaginary tree home.

The other tree I loved was our apricot tree. My father must have planted this tree many years before my arrival into Mum and Dad’s world, as it was a very tall, beautifully shaped, established fruit tree.

Its trunk was dressed in the type of bark you see on older trees. A bark that stored a lifetime of experiences, and housed many of nature’s small creatures that I once assumed were pests to that tree, only to realise much later in my life that this colony of wildlife was part of a wonderful, natural ecosystem, most likely enabling our tree to live its own life to the fullest, so it could be as prolific and perfect as it was.

But our apricot tree’s greatest feature was the fruit it produced in summer. Without fail, every year it would produce hundreds of ripe, juicy apricots, all patiently waiting on their tiny stalks for us to harvest. This tree could have fed the neighbourhood, and it is unfortunate that it only catered for our family and the birds.

At the end of each season, the fallen fruit that once lived in the higher, unreachable boughs would slowly rot into the ground, leaving large seeds behind to produce new baby trees. Because of the way we gardened back then, those shoots would end up at the peril of my father’s fine lawn mowing skills, never to be seen again.

I would often help my Dad in the garden. One of my responsibilities was to pull out all the dandelions, doing my absolute best to avoid any of the seeds blowing away. Back then, in our own minds, those wayward seeds meant more weeds – an undesirable in the garden and a curse for the amateur, part-time gardener.

My job was to remove these weeds with the precision and care of a surgeon, ensuring I didn’t lose any seeds to an unexpected, gentle breeze, thus creating more unpleasant surgical work in the weeks to follow.

My perception of weeds was naïve – of course it would be – I was still very young. In my own mind, weeds were our punishment for not tending to the garden more often. Like a petulant child who doesn’t get enough recognition from their parents that they believe is so rightly deserved, I considered weeds to exist, simply because we didn’t spend enough time acknowledging and attending to our garden’s ongoing needs.

Who would have thought almost four decades on, I would serve those dandelion leaves up to my own children for dinner, use the annual flowers as a garnish or infuse them in a tea? I see the irony in encouraging my own kids to blow those seeds into an area in our garden where the soil needs a little pick me up. My childhood weeds are now my wild herbs – also known as food.

Little did my father and I know that the pretty annuals we planted each season were edible. We never realised the benefit of composting our weeds to make more soil and add nutritional value to the garden, and our prunings could have served a much greater purpose for our garden than a trip to the local tip. Never did we consider the idea that if we planted more flowers and had less grass to mow, that the bees would have feasted on our garden and helped to improve on what we already had.

Little did I realise that my life would change so dramatically after spending one afternoon with Dad, building our very own family food garden.

I remember this day as though it happened only yesterday. I watched my father, tall and strong, turn our grass into soil – it was like magic – dig and turn, dig and turn. All of a sudden, this perfectly manicured area was now a mound of rich, organic soil.

This garden bed was plotted at the back of our house, nestled between my tallest tree and the stock standard Hills Hoist that was usually found in every suburban backyard way back then.

It was as typical as an Australian backyard garden could get, yet in one afternoon, we converted a small patch of well manicured grass into a space for growing the tastiest, freshest organic food.

I cannot remember when the word ‘organic’ became trendy. The word itself certainly has a nice ring to it, but that may simply be because of its definition and the lovely images it conjures up in your mind when you hear it. The thing is, most of the food we were eating as kids was organic, but didn’t need such a word to qualify it – it was simply known as food - fresh, flavoursome, seasonal, organic food. Locally grown, locally sourced. Produce that didn’t travel across the seas to reach our shores, no plastic packaging, and no marketing dollars needed to convince us of its status as ‘fresh’.

It was a time when supermarkets didn’t actually have a fresh produce section and the weekly shopping was just that – a weekly shop.

Do you remember when your fresh food was purchased at the local fruit and veg shop? You knew your fruiterer on a first name basis, and he knew yours. You probably even went to school with his kids. The food you purchased lasted the entire week, provided you didn’t eat it all in the first 3 or 4 days, because it tasted so good. Grapes and cherries were available only in the summer and you didn’t need to spend time deliberating over a dozen apple varieties.

Easy peel oranges didn’t exist (although I must admit I am grateful for this innovation) and carrots tasted just as they should - like carrots.

You trusted this person who was responsible for the sourcing and supply of the fresh produce that ended up on the family table. There was transparency in the origins of this food we ate.

Our family meals were always together – Mum, Dad, my sister and I – around the table at 6.00pm every night. Every night my Mum cooked dinner – at least two courses, and sometimes even three. To this day, I still don’t know how we managed to eat everything that was served, but we did.

Dinner would usually consist of a soup, meat-and-three-veg and, if we were lucky (and Mum found the time) a delicious dessert. No matter what you’d had for dinner, there was always room for dessert.

To even think of attempting to pull off such a feast every day is, quite honestly, beyond me, let alone to even consume the amount of food we used to eat. However, we were never unhealthy as kids, we had no food allergies and we weren’t at all overweight. Diabetes wasn’t a childhood epidemic and obesity in our kids was rare.

Going to McDonalds was an annual treat (it really was like Christmas) and eating out was a rarity.

Coming together every night at the dinner table was a ritual. Dinnertime was predictable and routine – and pleasantly so. It was a routine that, as an adult, has become one of my fondest memories, because every day we came together as a family and reconnected. It was something we seemed to do with ease and, without realizing it at the time, must have been a priority for our family because that ritual was very rarely broken.

Food - its origins, true flavour and nutritional properties appear to have diminished, as has its fundamental purpose – a way to connect with those we love.

For many of us, the childhood memories we seem to remember and treasure the most are often the simplest, maybe even inconsequential moments of our lives. I wonder whether my own three boys will remember our first overseas family trip, or the day we all spent together at our family farm, building vege boxes, filling them with soil and planting seedlings well into the night.

Our own childhood memories are incredibly powerful and influential in how we ultimately shape our lives. It gives us some perspective on what’s important to us as individuals and, if we pay attention to our inner self, has the potential to show us what really matters.

What we often find though is that the little things seem to matter the most.

Looking back, I was incredibly fortunate to share in that day with my Dad and build our family a small food garden, and I’m particularly blessed that this one afternoon has remained patiently dormant within me, waiting for the right time to reveal itself to me.

I still vividly recall the sights, sounds and smells of that day - the freshly cut grass, the feeling of the summer’s warmth on my skin, the excitable buzz of bees, and familiar sounds of the fizz escaping from Dad’s weekly can of beer – a ritual that was only performed during Summer.

I also remember the smell of our very first own grown tomato.

So why am I sharing all of this with you? To be completely honest, this memory of my time with Dad building our vegetable bed never crossed my mind, and certainly wasn’t shared, until quite recently.

A few years ago, my family and I were down at our family farm in Swan Bay, on the Bellarine Peninsula in rural Victoria. It was that time of the day few of us enjoy – a late Sunday afternoon – when the sun is still shining bright, but getting on in the day, knowing that tomorrow has us heading back to the grind of routine and the working week.

I had spent most of that afternoon with my youngest son, Jack. We were tending to our food garden, working alongside each other, but also enjoying our own time and space.

As I (rather unsuccessfully) attempted to round up the family and get them into the car for our trip home, I found Jack, still working on one of our vege beds, tending to our heirloom tomatoes.

For reasons I cannot explain, I experienced a deja-vue like no other, which would ultimately change our lives.

That moment watching my 5 year old, in a private moment all of his own, harvest our ripe and ready tomatoes was the moment I knew he understood something about food that so many of us don’t. In his own mind, he had a purpose, a reason and responsibility to ensure that those tomatoes he had sown from seed and watered and fed over time were ready to harvest.

He knew something that so many of us don’t – where HIS food came from.

Our lives and its purpose is the sum of various life experiences and events. My mini-moments, such as weeding our garden, picking apricots straight off the tree and the weekly shopping trip with Mum have all contributed to my now, but I wholeheartedly believe that the trigger for this realisation was that one afternoon with my Dad, building our family’s food garden.

So many thoughts came flooding through that day, and for many days that followed. The cogs in my brain kept turning, trying to piece together the underlying meaning behind my somewhat crazy deja-vu and the moment I watched my son replicating a simple acting of harvesting tomatoes, the same way I did four decades before him.

What has changed in our own childhood and the upbringing we now encourage for our own kids? We seem to be on a rollercoaster of madness and chaos, trying to keep up with the unrealistic commitments that we continue to place upon ourselves, all in an effort to simply get through to the end of the day, only to start it all again tomorrow.

Whilst we may feel at times that we actually get stuff done, we really need to consider whether this is all sustainable in the longer term, and what impact it will have on us, our kids and their kids.

Even though life will never be like it used to (and really, do we want it to?), simple changes can be made, in order to help us reconnect with our own self, our family and our wider community.

I believe - with all my heart and soul - that growing food is one way of doing just this, so much so that I’ve gone to the trouble of writing this book, in order to share my thoughts, ideas and message with you.

We need to become more aware about the foods we eat – its origins, how it’s produced, its nutritional value and how far it has travelled to reach our family’s plate.

How does today’s food impact on our family’s ongoing health and wellbeing and what underlying problems are caused, directly and indirectly, as a result of the foods we’re now limited to consuming.

In almost every classroom in every school, at least one child relies on the security of an epipen to be close at hand. I’d never even heard of an epipen until I had my own children.

In a time when obesity in our children is at an all time high, and food allergies, disease and food-related health issues are escalating, there’s never been a better time to seriously think about our food.

My hope is that you, the reader, finds some invaluable food for thought in this book. My dream is that you are inspired by the ideas and information I share with you to make change – even just a small change – in your own life, so that you and your family will find real benefit and reward for your efforts.

My goal is to have every backyard, balcony or windowsill grow food.

It’s never too late to make small, but significant changes in our lives. By nature, we don’t tend to embrace change. But remember, change is good. Change is a way of evolving, growing and improving on what we currently do. Change encourages us to be inspired and to learn, and every day of our lives, we must take the time to learn.

This book is packed with information, thoughts and ideas that will open your mind and generate awareness for you. The pages that follow are written by a mother who wants the best for her kids and to see the world we are currently living in continue to improve, so that it becomes an even better place for our future generations.

My tips and tricks will encourage small changes to be made simply, without force or too much effort, but will most surely deliver a fabulous return for the investment of your time.

Most importantly, we must remember this. Our children rely on us to guide, nurture and educate them. Whilst our own personal value systems and fundamentals may differ, the foundation of what we all want for our family – our children – is the best we can afford to give.

My sincerest hope is that the pages that follow can help achieve that for you.