



# Kylie's Bowled Over by Fair Trade Deal

*Kylie Kwong tells Lee Suckling how she has developed a passion for ethical eating over the years.*

**K**ylie Kwong's interest in fresh food began young, not that she knew a world without it. "Mum ingrained in me from age five the importance of freshness quality of produce - being of Cantonese heritage, we are naturally and inherently obsessed with 'freshness' - so I guess it all started back then," Kwong reminisces.

She notes, however, that the family had no idea of the trading conditions of food producers in Asia. "My knowledge was very little on this subject; my mother, the chief cook in our household enjoyed shopping for all our fresh produce at the local fruit and veg store, butcher, Sydney Fish Market and Chinatown. The only imported stuff we'd cook with, I guess, was the soy sauce and shao hsing wine from China (which we bought in Chinatown) So, in other words, we did not really feel the need I guess to explore this subject."

How things have changed since Kwong has grown - she is now a representative of Fair Trade and Oxfam and has dedicated much of her celebrity to ensuring Australians understand the importance of buying ethical food.

To backtrack a little, Kwong's professional cooking career began as head chef at Wockpool in 1994, then in 1998 heading the kitchens of bills and bills2. She then went to China and connected to her roots. "In 1999, I went on a life-changing trip to China. Of course, food featured prominently, but it was a visit to a traditional Shanghai-style teahouse that really moved me," Kwong says. "The room was furnished with polished rosewood tables, complete with matching stools that fitted neatly under the tables like a jigsaw puzzle. I felt like I was inside a beautiful lacquered box, exquisite in every detail. I decided then and there that I wanted to capture this moment and release its essence in my own restaurant."

With Bill Granger as a business partner, Kwong opened the doors of Billy Kwong in 2000. "We breathed life into our vision of a small, energetic and vibrant eating house that served fantastically fresh Chinese food. Many years on, I can honestly say that I still love everything about the restaurant - I have been the sole owner for some time now and I enjoy the challenge of running my own business."

About four and a half years into life in the kitchen at Billy Kwong, as her public profile developed with her own TV series, ethical eating started to gain prominence in Kwong's menus. "I made a conscious choice to shift my restaurant menu from 'conventional' to 'locally grown, organic and biodynamic' about seven years ago. I ate organic food at home long before I switched to it at Billy Kwong; it was only a matter of time for me," she says.

"I had to work out the finances first of my business; I had to restructure my business in order to accommodate this new produce - it does cost a lot more, but what was most important to me, and still is, is that my business was not only profitable, but also ethically correct. [It must be] focussed very much on the welfare of people and the planet as well.

"It is my contribution if you like, to my

community. Most importantly, from a cook's point of view, it literally tastes better."

It was in 2005 when Kwong wrote *My China*, which took her to her ancestral home in China and gave her "a growing awareness of the complexity and scope of Chinese regional cooking, as well as a profound urge to reconnect with my family in China".

Serving for inspiration to write *My China* was her desire to trace back through her family roots and heritage; and her yearning to learn about the many provincial nuances within Chinese cuisine.

"Creating that book, was a deep journey - having the opportunity to return to my great grandfather's home in Toishan Province was profound - knowing exactly where you come from really is a very settling, grounding experience.

"My immediate family were so delighted to hear all the stories of our ancestors - the book is like a family record, with images as well, which I know we will be able to share with our family and all the generations to come. For the community back here, I have no doubt they enjoyed the book too, because it just confirmed to fellow Anglo-Australians of just how important and powerful the Chinese community is to Australia - how much influence the Chinese have had on multi-cultural Australia. Chinese food is the most popular food in Sydney, I believe."

Since *My China*, Kwong has continually been involved in efforts to benefit the Chinese Australian community. "I've been one of the Sydney Chinese New Year Festival Ambassadors for the past three years for the City of Sydney," she notes. "[And] I was a World Expeditions Host between 2004-2008, where I led culinary tours through China and Tibet."

As the 'fresh' mantra has been cemented into Kwong's life, she has recently become more dedicated to making the world a better place through food. "I firmly believe that fresh is best, but I also believe that our food choices should be ethical, sustainable and supportive of both

the natural and human environment."

It is for such a reason that Kwong has put her name to brands she feels are doing a great job at supporting sustainable food production as a whole. Kwong feels passionate about the work of Fair Trade and Oxfam, and thus the launch of her first signature range of tableware has been a pleasure to create. "When Oxfam approached me to consider designing a range of kitchenware, I realised this was a project which could bring together my passion for cooking, love of art, and advocacy for a better deal for producers in developing countries," she says.

Made in conjunction with Oxfam Australia, it is produced by one of Oxfam's Fair Trade producer partners in Vietnam. Oxfam Australia's Director of Trading Nadine Silverberg, who initiated Kwong's project, said Kwong's involvement would make a huge, broader difference to the Vietnamese producers that Oxfam works with. "Not only will the artisans crafting Kwong's first-ever product range receive fair wages and working conditions, proceeds from the sale of these products will support Oxfam's work with communities in developing countries," Silverberg says. "Kwong's support is also playing an important role in raising the profile of Fair Trade in Australia more generally, which is likely to increase demand for Fair Trade products and, in turn, further benefit the fair trade groups Oxfam works with worldwide."

Kwong believes a celebrity should use his or her profile to benefit the global community as and where possible. "I see it as my responsibility to send out the 'right' messages regarding food into the global community - if you have a significant audience then you need to remain humble and maintain the 'right' motivation and intentions behind all that you do and say; you influence people and you need to remember how powerful and important this is.

"As soon as we let our 'celebrity' get to our head, our ego gets out of control, and we lose the 'magic' that got us to that position in the first place. Humility is the key to all things." ■

