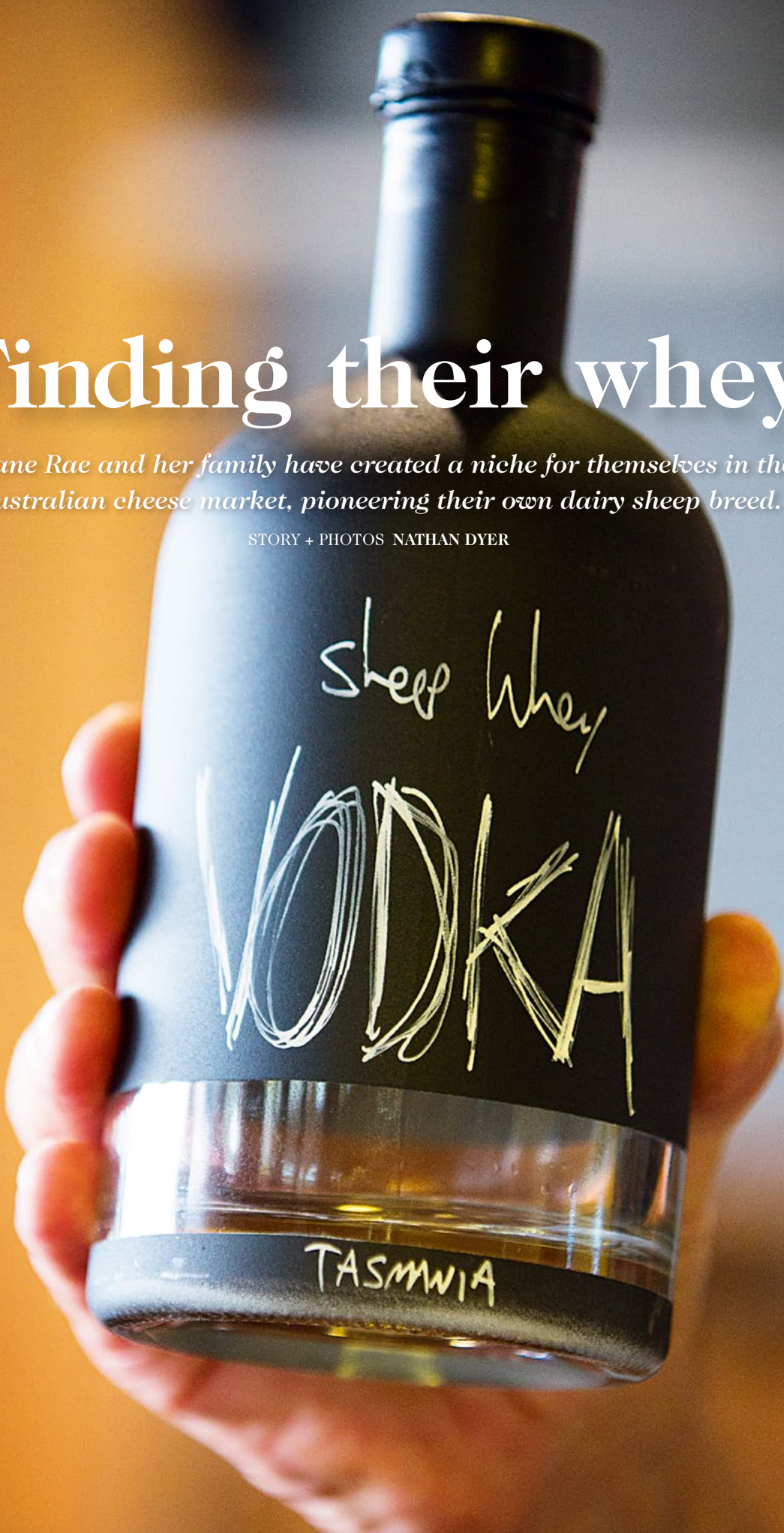


# Finding their whey

*Diane Rae and her family have created a niche for themselves in the Australian cheese market, pioneering their own dairy sheep breed.*

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER



*ABOVE: Diane Rae (right) with daughter Nicole Gilliver and son Ryan Hartshorn.  
OPPOSITE: A bottle of the uniquely Tasmanian Hartshorn sheep whey vodka.*

**O**n a mild summer morning in southern Tasmania, Diane Rae is welcoming a busload of tourists to the outdoor deck of Grandveve Cheeses. As the visitors sit down to platters of sheep-milk cheeses overlooking the purple hues of Birchs Bay, Diane tells the story behind one of Tasmania's most unique boutique food producers.

Located 40 kilometres south of Hobart, Grandveve is the result of almost two decades of sheep dairy pioneering by Diane, her daughter Nicole Gilliver and son Ryan Hartshorn. Although the dairy started producing cheese in 2002, the journey began well before that, says the former Brisbane insurance broker and financial planner. "It was about 1990 when I decided that everything I was doing work-wise was based on either greed or fear," Diane says. "It didn't matter how much money I made for clients as a financial planner, it was never enough, and in insurance it was all about, 'What if you die? What if your wife dies? What if you lose your income?'" Diane says. "I decided I didn't want to go on like that, so I sold my business and thought, 'What am I going to do now?'"

A stint running sustainable living festivals convinced her

to leave the city and look for a more meaningful life in the bush. "I really got the bug of sustainable living and growing your own food," Diane says. Soon after she purchased 8 hectares in Maleny, 95km north of Brisbane, growing market vegetables and establishing a home-delivery service and later producing cheeses from her small herd of Dexter cows. The road to Grandveve was set.

A visit to Tasmania in 2001 completed the picture. "I came down here for a holiday and really had an epiphany; it was like coming home," Diane says. A year later, Diane and her then partner moved to the Apple Isle, purchased 20ha at Birchs Bay and planted a vineyard, with the plan to build a winery. In search of a cashflow while the vineyard established, Diane came up with the idea of dairy sheep.

Drawing on her own cheese-making experience, work as a 'relief milker' around Maleny, and university studies, Diane learnt everything she could about the industry. "It wasn't totally new to me, but what was new was using a sheep, and not a cow," she laughs.

Today, the grapes are gone and Grandveve Cheeses is one of Australia's leading sheep cheese producers. It has its own breed – the Grandveve Dairy Sheep, a cross of East Friesian and Bedouin Awassi developed by Diane to >



*Diane Rae with Grandvewe's dairy sheep.*

create a high producing, strong dairy breed. The business employs 13 staff, along with the trio's partners, and milks about 300 ewes daily. The product range includes a dozen cheeses, ranging from soft, through to hard and blues. In addition to the Birchs Bay farm gate, which welcomes 40,000 visitors annually, the business has a retail outlet at Hobart's Brooke Street Pier and a regular stall at the Salamanca Markets. Diane, Nicole and Ryan also travel regularly to food and wine shows across Australia.

Nicole, a qualified cheesemaker and judge, heads up the cheese side of the business and Ryan is the ideas man behind Hartshorn Distillery, which makes boutique vodka and gin from the dairy's main waste product, whey. "A lot of people ask, 'How can you work with family?' but for me the joy has been watching Nicole and Ryan grow into business people," Diane says. "They're now both highly competent entrepreneurial business people. The three of us have different ways of looking at things and when we get together the problem-solving is quite astounding."

Although nowadays she leaves the milking to others, focusing on marketing and genetic improvement of the Grandvewe flock, Diane remains closely involved in the day-to-day running of the dairy, regularly helping out in the cheese factory and packing room. "Because we're a small business and we're a very vertically tiered business, we literally do everything skill-wise from paddock through to plate to tourism, so it's very fragmented, but it also means

we get to do a whole lot of different things," she says.

Product development is also a key focus, demonstrated by Diane and Nicole's latest creation, a cheese called The Gin Herbalist, made using the spent herbs from Ryan's distillery. "The botanicals used in the gin-making process are all Australian natives – lemon myrtle, aniseed myrtle, pepperberry – so we now have a cheese that is matured with the spent botanicals from the gin on the outside and over its life the subtle aromas of the gin and the botanicals actually percolate through the case of the cheese." The mother-daughter partnership is also looking at using oak barrels from the distillery to produce a smoked cheese. "The wood we'll use for the smoking process will be the wood from those spent oak barrels," Diane says.

After 16 years entertaining tourists, Diane says the face-to-face interaction remains crucial for the business. "People come here to hear our story; they want to see, feel and touch the farmer, and that's why we're hands-on," she says. "It's about relating to people one-on-one. That way people understand who we are and they have an emotional investment in the product."

As for her island home, Diane says there's no place like Tasmania. "Because when you live in absolute beauty 24 hours a day it can do nothing but affect who you are and how you view life," she says, smiling, as Nicole makes cheese next door and Ryan distills spirits in the basement.