

"The UK buyers who came to Australia had a much higher expectation of quality and food safety and a big part of my role was recruiting expertise into the business and developing a greater quality focus across the groups' farms and distribution centres.

"Myself and the CEO, Harry Debney, worked on a post-harvest project which significantly improved the company's handling of produce from the point of harvest on-farm, right the way through to our retail customers of Coles, Woolworths and Aldi.

"Five of us were lucky enough to take the Visy private jet for seven days to do a post-harvest study tour in the United States, UK and Germany.

"It was an amazing trip."

After five years in Melbourne, Mr Heather finally returned to WA when he was appointed the WA manager for Costa Farms, a fruit wholesaling business which sells products to big retailers including Coles, Woolworths and Aldi, as well as independent supermarkets such as IGA.

"It was a tough business that ran six days a week from 1am in the morning to 5pm in the evening," Mr Heather said.

Looking for a change of pace, he soon accepted a role as chief executive of the Western Citrus Alliance, where he worked with a group of WA citrus growers.

"I went back to doing what I loved and worked with growers to help improve their class one yield, which is basically the amount of fruit growers can sell to Coles

and Woolworths," Mr Heather said.

"Some growers had only 20 per cent class one from their orchards, which obviously means 80 per cent of their fruit didn't meet the required standards.

Mr Heather found many ways to help the citrus growers improve their profitability and gained funding from the State government's Royalties for Regions program, as well as Federal government funding to fly a specialist citrus agronomist over from Mildura, Victoria, to help local producers.

"The agronomist brought a lot of new knowledge to the group and it was a really interesting experience," he said.

"Some growers really appreciated the new practices we were able to bring, while others were a little more reluctant to change."

Mr Heather was recently appointed to agribusiness firm Alterra's executive team as chief operating and technical officer to help with investments in avocados.

He also manages his own agribusiness consulting firm, Foothills Fresh, in which he works on a diverse range of projects.

"I must say it was a bit like jumping off a cliff and not knowing whether you have a parachute on," Mr Heather said about going out on his own.

He is also consulting with Costa on their avocado project with the Macquarie Bank that has seen more than \$100 million of avocado farms purchased on Australia's east coast.

"They asked me to conduct a gap analysis of their avocado farms to map out improvements in quality and profitability to help with their vision to export and



> Mr Heather (left) visiting one of the stone fruit breeders in the South of France while working in the United Kingdom.

improve product going to their customers," he said.

Mr Heather is also working with Nutrano, a big citrus, blueberry and mango producer in the Eastern States.

"I spent some time out at their facilities in Mildura and it's amazing seeing the mighty Murray first-hand and hearing from the locals how the drought is affecting them all," Mr Heather said.

"Water is a massive issue for Australia particularly along the Murray, the food bowl of Australia."

Mr Heather told *Farm Weekly* that he was frustrated at the lack of response to tackle climate change as he had witnessed first-hand how farmers were suffering its full force every year.

"Increased climatic risk is having a big

impact on Australian farmers and global food producers," he said.

Reflecting on his post-horticultural experience, Mr Heather said ensuring produce was fresh, produced in a sustainable way and offered value to the consumer was key in the global supply chain.

"Post-harvest agriculture is a critical piece of a very complicated puzzle," Mr Heather said.

"Any supermarket can sell Coke, for example, but having the freshest, best eating fruit and veg every day of the year is far more challenging - not all retailers can do this well.

"Bringing the best quality product to the consumer is achieved through good science and good process within global value chains."

Voice of the Outback

By FLEUR MCDONALD



WALT Disney said: 'If you have a dream, you can do it.'

Have you ever had a dream that you thought was impossible to come true, because it was just that - a dream?

If you're a reader, you've probably noticed an increase in what everyone seems to be calling 'Rural Lit' novels, at the moment.

Stories of strong heroines, rural crime, with a bit of farming and subjects that affect country people thrown in.

It started off with Rachael Treasure penning her iconic novel *Jillaroo* (if you haven't read it, I suggest you do yourself a favour).

Soon after, Tony Parsons followed with stories of old-fashioned men and gorgeous girls, riding horses and breeding fine wool Merino sheep.

These books flew off the shelves and had print runs most authors would dream of.

Shortly after those two, both myself and another WA author, Fiona Palmer hit the scene.

Now there is more than four Rural Lit books per month, being released.

Great for all who love reading this genre.

I'd never given any thought to becoming an author as a career, when I first left school.

Most of the authors I used to read; Enid Blyton, The Bronte Sisters, well, they were all dead, so it didn't seem like a great career to go into.

However, by some miracle, I happened to be in the right place at the right time, with half a novel written, and managed to land myself a publishing deal.

Crazy for a farmer and mum living in the back blocks of Esperance.

On November 5, my 14th book, *Starting from Now*, will make its appearance in bookshops across Australia.

It will suddenly pop up on your eReader, if you've pre-ordered it and, if you pre-ordered through one of the online bookstores and had forgotten about it, you'll end up with a surprise

(nice or otherwise) in the mail, not long after publication date.

I can't tell you how sick this makes me feel.

Sick as in nervous.

Nervous as in, I'm-putting-myself-out-for-people-to-bash-my-work, sick.

I guess that goes with being an author, but even after 10 years, it's still quite confronting for a girl who is more comfortable talking to her dog and close friends than standing in front of a crowd.

I had no idea of the opportunities my first manuscript, *Red Dust* would lead to.

And lead, it has; to overseas book deals, meeting people I had never would have, opening doors I never knew existed.

One of these opportunities was to take another dream I had and put it into reality.

I've wanted to help people in the RRR areas who were experiencing domestic violence.

Again, that was another 'right place at the right time' experience when I met an amazing man called Peter Fitzpatrick.

He took my dream and hauled me through the hallowed halls of Canberra, talking to politicians and finally we came out with funding to the tune of \$2.3m. Thanks, Federal Minister for Health, Greg Hunt.

The organisation, *Breaking the Silence* will be launching across Western Australia over the next three years and then expanding nationwide.

Now this might sound like I'm patting myself on the back, but I'm not.

I'm trying to say, that this woman, with not a lot of confidence and without a knowledge other than in things like stocking ratios, stock and pastures, has done things she never dreamed possible.

I just want to say never give up. Dare to dream. Dare to believe.

Because dreams come true to ordinary people.