

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

A LONG, UNCERTAIN JOURNEY ENDS WITH A GREAT
WELCOME FOR A YOUNG REFUGEE FAMILY.

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Red gums rise from paddocks
beyond the Kalangadoo orchard.
FACING PAGE Lal Lian in the
organic garden he created.

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LAL LIAN HAD NEVER eaten beetroot before moving to Mount Gambier. Kale, spinach and parsnip were equally foreign; meals back home in Chin, a mountainous region in western Burma, were mainly rice and sweet corn. Now, as he harvests crops in a market garden at Kalangadoo, some 30 kilometres north of South Australia's Mount Gambier, his basket overflows with a variety of organic vegetables bound for farmers' markets, restaurants, cafés and his own family kitchen.

"Beetroot we are still not really keen to have yet, but kale we love as it's so healthy," he says with a smile. That luxury of choice has become one of many daily blessings for the 32-year-old since he came to Australia as a refugee in 2009. Prior to that he had spent years in New Delhi — having fled Burma at the age of 19 — where he met his wife Vika, also a refugee.

"I'll never forget my first meeting with an immigration person — I asked them to please thank the Australian Government for bringing us to a place with such freedom and opportunity," he says.

Initially settling in Adelaide, Lal was lured to Mount Gambier in 2010 by the promise of work in the horticulture industry, then received an offer beyond his wildest dreams. Kalangadoo apple growers Chris and Michelle McColl, who had previously mentored a group of Asian refugees, offered him almost a hectare of highly prized fully certified organic soil to produce his own crops.

"We had been cutting hay but decided that it could be put to better use; we didn't have the time to grow organic vegetables ourselves but knew the demand for them and wanted to see it happen," Chris says.

"Since I started doing this, they have very much become my backbone — how to grow, what to do," Lal says. "They have been so supportive and they are such wonderful people."

But the McColls insist it has been Lal's hard work that has led to his success. "We provide the water and the land,

the mentoring and guidance in return for the weekly rent of one box of vegetables," Chris says. "We're letting him use the land, but he's doing all of the work — with hand tools only — and it has been a really rewarding experience and a privilege to get to know his family."

Lal and Vika, and their children — Miriam, four, Sarah, one, and newborn Joseph — regularly share meals with the McColls. "Michelle once made roasted beetroot, parsnip and carrots, and I asked my wife to do the same one night. She tried to do it the way they did it... never again!" Lal says with a smile.

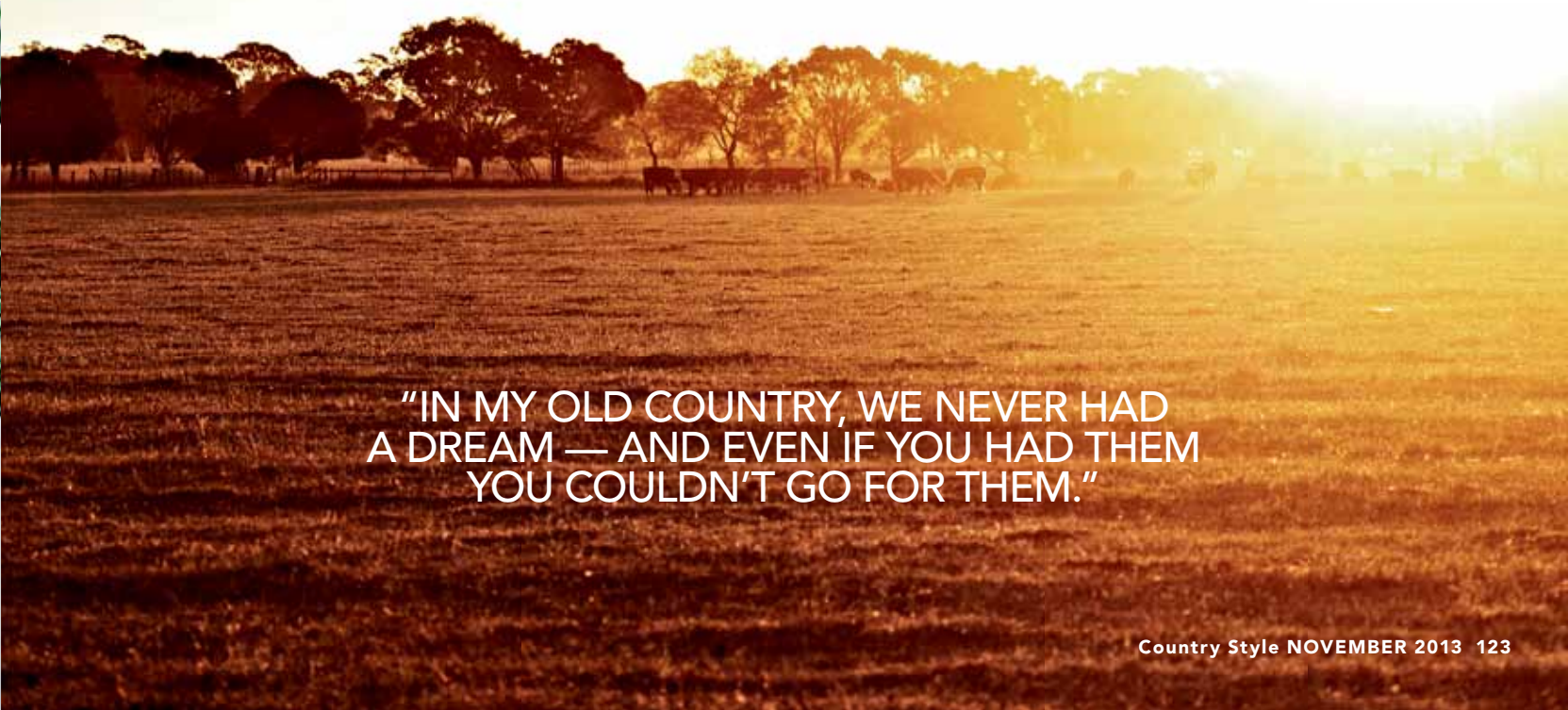
Becoming founding members of the Mount Gambier Farmers' Market has been another way for Lal and Vika to mix with the community. "Farmers' markets are such a beautiful concept; after growing vegetables myself, seeing them start off as a tiny seed and how healthy they look — people would be so excited to see this and I really hope that they can support these markets so that growers like me can keep going."

Despite the widespread publicity about the benefits of buying organic, Lal admits that he has sometimes had difficulties trying to convince his local customers about the value. "Country people don't seem to be excited by organic vegetables, but people go crazy for them in the city — if only the cost of getting the produce to Adelaide or Melbourne didn't make it so difficult," he says.

In a bid to diversify and improve his income, Lal is now planning to study social work. It's a career he began as a volunteer among the Chin community in India, where he "waited and waited" for resettlement after escaping the political uncertainty of Burma. It's also a way to pay forward some of the kindness he has received in his new home.

"In my old country, we never had a dream — and even if you had them you couldn't go for them," he says. "Here, we can have a dream for our future and while it may take us longer than others, we are willing to try. It's up to us — that's what I feel." *

CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE Lal with Chris and Michelle McColl; the farming is all done by hand; a shady spot for harvested produce; packing zucchinis, beans, cucumbers and green tomatoes; Roma tomatoes on the vine; cherry tomatoes ready for a farmers' market. FACING PAGE View from the garden over a neighbouring farm at sunset.



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