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FILL YOUR CUP

FROM VEGETARIAN LAWYER TO BROTH-LOVING WHOLEFOODS CAFE OWNER, SOULLA CHAMBERLAIN HAS TAKEN QUITE A JOURNEY OVER THE PAST DECADE.

words LINSEY RENDELL photos JONATHAN CAMI

The wholefoods advocate founded the online Star Anise Organic Wholefoods grocer and recently opened Sydney's first broth bar. Through her business, Soulla champions a return to eating traditional unprocessed foods, but without all the laborious preparation that's difficult to squeeze into our time-constrained modern lifestyles. She wants to see more wholefoods in lunch boxes and on dinner tables, and is teaching Sydney's health-conscious crowd how to prepare nutrient-dense food quickly from scratch.

This exploration of conscious eating began while Soulla was working as a corporate lawyer. After 10 years in the field, the long hours and high-stress environment eventually took a toll on both Soulla and her family's health. "I was macrobiotic vegetarian at the time and even though we didn't have any processed food, my body and those of my family were falling apart at the seams. I kept breaking bones, I would pick up any cold and flu that was doing the rounds, I developed acne, I stopped menstruating. I had a number of health issues. My husband at the time suffered very severe depression and our newborn ended up in hospital at 11 months for bronchial pneumonia. Round and round we went with antibiotics and I thought, 'There has to be a better way,'" she recalls.

Soulla was on maternity leave, so had time to pour her energy into finding a solution. She began reading and came across a theory suggesting the highly processed, industrialised food of our modern-day diet causes many health ailments, and that consuming traditional wholefoods instead is optimal for sustained good health. She decided to test these theories on herself and her family, and went in search of activated nuts and grains, fermented foods like sauerkraut and kombucha, and organic meats and vegetables. "My family went from barely surviving to thriving. Once you've experienced that kind of recovery and feel and look so much better, you don't want to go back," she says.

After such positive results, Soulla wanted to continue eating and cooking this way. "But 10 years ago in Sydney, the wholefoods scene was different from today," she recalls. She found it difficult to find the foods she needed and so began making krauts, broths and refined sugar-free treats from her garden, in Sydney's beachside suburb of Bronte. Friends soon caught wind and asked Soulla to make a little extra for them. This rippled into orders from friends of friends, and Soulla suddenly realised she wouldn't be returning to work in law. She founded Star Anise Organic Wholefoods in 2007, an online store stocking handmade bliss balls and chocolate, activated nuts, kimchi, kefir, lacto-fermented beet kvass and 'brothsicles'.

As Sydney's awareness of wholefoods and nutrient-dense eating grew, so too did Star Anise, until the business finally outgrew Soulla's house in 2015. "I was crawling over boxes to get into bed. I had filled every room with stock pots and dehydrators, and I had 10 staff practically living in my house. In December 2015 the universe gave me a shove and I took a lease and opened Broth Bar & Larder. It was a daunting step, but in hindsight, it's been the best thing," she says.

Broth Bar & Larder offers a bricks-and-mortar look into the pantry staples of Star Anise and operates as a cafe, serving up cups of steaming house-made broths and hearty lunchtime eats that mosey from shepherds pie made with grass-fed beef and chicken liver to wild fish curry or slow-cooked lamb casserole. Locals can pop in for their weekly grocery top-up of fermented foods, gluten-free muesli, various stocks and wholesome snacks, and stay for a nourishing meal. Says Soulla, "We're a little bit unusual in that there might be other companies that specialise in just sauerkraut or kombucha or raw dark chocolate or bone broth. But we make the full spectrum of traditional wholefoods. And that exemplifies my philosophy that there's no one panacea. We have 45 different products because, for me, that's what traditional wholefoods is all about."



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Soulla sources Certified Organic meats and vegetables wherever possible and is rigorous in her research of farming practices so she can give transparent assurances to her customers. "Certified Organic gives you some assurance that the animals have been treated humanely and are eating what they're biologically designed to eat, and that the vegetables have been grown in the way nature intended," she says. "There are certain products that you can't get certified, like sea salt, so we do our own research to make sure it's unrefined and doesn't contain anti-caking agents. No stone is left unturned. I ensure the products we sell and the ingredients that go into all of our products are from the finest provenance." Broth Bar's approach also ensures the entire animal is being put to good use. "We're buying not just the meat, but the bones and the livers of the animals," Soulla says. "We're utilising the whole of the animal. I really advocate nose-to-tail eating."

Along with championing provenance, Soulla is a crusader for recycling and cutting down on waste. "We give the bones that come out of the bone broth to a company that turns them into fertiliser and pet food, so the bones don't go into landfill. And we compost all of our veggie scraps," she says. The cafe's single-use packaging is BPA-free and recyclable. A reuse policy also encourages customers to bring glass jars back to be refilled at a cheaper price. Soulla attributes her rigid anti-waste attitude to her upbringing, with messages such as "things don't come easy, you've got to work hard" and "we're really lucky to have good food, don't waste it" passed down to her. "I think it stems from growing up with post-war immigrant parents, who left their motherland in Cyprus to escape poverty and achieve a better life in Australia. Growing up, I always felt that I had a scarcity mentality," she says.

Tapping into her Greek-Cypriot heritage, Soulla lives by philosopher Hippocrates' "let food be thy medicine" notion. What she cooks at home has become the basis for what she serves at her cafe, often informed by a hefty dose of her mum's family recipes. "My cooking philosophy is about eating nutrient-dense food that's ethically sourced and properly prepared. It also has to be super simple and easy to make, and it's got to taste delicious," she says. This approach has spilled into the realm of school lunches, with Soulla – who is a single mum to two children – uploading an Instagram photo of her kids' lunches each day during school term. "Something I'm really passionate about is getting kids to eat real food – really trying to eschew packaged food as much as possible and make homemade food from scratch. Hopefully I've inspired many parents and carers to realise that making healthy lunches isn't that difficult," she says.

Soulla's positive mindset, coupled with a lifelong yearning to understand what makes the human body thrive, has driven her forward throughout her challenging journey. What began as a way to repair her own health and ensure her children get the nutrients they need has grown to engage and inspire a wider community. "I think life is too short to have to deal with and be saddled with chronic illness and degenerative disease. I don't want my children to waste time and energy on that," she says. "I want them to be so vibrant and robust that they can focus 100% of their energy on what they love doing, and not have to worry about feeling ill or looking ill. That's why I do what I do." 🌿

