



MANY LESBIAN COUPLES DREAM OF BEING SELF-EMPLOYED AND WORKING TOGETHER. **KIM CAREY** MEETS TWO WOMEN WHO HAVE ACHIEVED THAT DREAM.

With the right ingredients, the alchemy of talent and passion can transform an idea into a business, and magic can happen.

Leslie Ford and Marina Batalha have mixed their magic by combining and refining their complimentary talents, temperaments and passions. Together they own and run Red Ginger Asian Food and Home in Byron Bay. Marina is eager to explain the name of their venture. "In Chinese red is the colour for happiness and good luck, and ginger is synonymous with food." Hence the name takes you on a sensory experience the moment you enter their enticing domain.

It was the relaxed and beautiful environment of Byron Bay that seduced Leslie and Marina into staying when they initially came for a holiday in 2001. From humble beginnings and small premises, their business has flourished and is now well established in one of Byron Bay's shopping and eating precincts.

Marina's talents as an artist have created the oriental look and feel of the store, while Leslie's business acumen and social graces are the heart and life of its day-to-day running. Marina describes herself as the introvert in the partnership and Leslie as the extrovert. "We work well together by knowing who we are and what we can offer separately, without competing with one another." The formula works and the store reflects a mood that is a combination of both Leslie and Marina's unique history.

Marina, who has a Macanese father and Portuguese mother, was born in Macau and moved with her family to Perth when she was eighteen. By the time

she was twenty-one she was on her way across the Nullarbor to Sydney, with little money and even less English. She loved the energy of Sydney and set herself up as a decoupage artist with a stall in the Paddington market, supplementing her income as a hair and makeup artist for television commercials and film. She later had her own upholstery business.

Transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and beautiful has always been Marina's natural gift, one she attributes to her mother, Laura and the input of her four creative sisters. She says her sister Su Su, who owns café Belgenny at Taylor Square and is also a lesbian, has been a particular source of inspiration and support especially since the death of their mother in 2005.

Leslie left New Zealand at a young age to study drama in Sydney. She later became a speech teacher. She and Marina met in 1995 when Marina decided, after living with rheumatoid arthritis, to take control of her life and healing and began training in the Rudolf Steiner system. Coincidentally Leslie was one of her teachers and after being invited by Marina to attend the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (where Marina's float won first prize) she and Marina became lovers. They have been together in life and business ever since.

Leslie recalls wanting to leave Sydney to find a better climate for Marina's illness. "Marina's brother had a small gym in Port Hedland and offered for us to take it over." Off they went to the desert, 2500 kilometres away to begin their new life together. Although isolated and far away from the eastern

Photos: Sonja Friedrich
From left, The interior of Red Ginger, Marina and Leslie, with their dogs Ruby and Hugo.



“We work well together by knowing who we are and what we can offer separately, without competing with one another.”

suburbs of Sydney, both Leslie and Marina made the most of their new environment. Within months they were building the business and becoming popular with the local community. They held dance parties in the gym to supplement their income and inject some social energy into the town. Next they created a café and art exhibition space by transforming the squash court. Leslie laughs, “Those high white walls just lent themselves to hanging art.” Together they created a gallery of beauty and a place for people of all backgrounds to come together. This space was to become the embryo of the future Regional Gallery of Port Hedland, their legacy to this part of the world. After four years, two business awards and lots of hard work, the isolation of a small desert town became too much and it was time to move on. In hindsight Leslie says that the time in Western Australia was the preparation for Red Ginger. They knew they worked well together and could make a business succeed. They moved to Byron Bay for a rest and after a year of what they call “creative pleasure” Marina saw a run-down Asian grocery in a then not so popular part of town. She came home excited about transforming it into their Asian store ‘with a difference’. Leslie, not convinced, said “No way”. Yet knowing Marina’s passion and talent to transform the not so beautiful into the beautiful, she acquiesced and Red Ginger was born. Red Ginger is generously stocked with rich spices, steaming yum cha snacks, oriental medicines, home wares and traditional Chinese tearoom settings. The heady combination of aromas and visual artistry

make Red Ginger a dynamic hub for locals and visitors alike. The friendly warmth and energy of the staff ensure that every visit is an experience. There is comfortable seating at the front of the store where customers can sit, sip complementary Chinese tea and sample the wide variety of Asian snacks and delicacies. There is no sense of being rushed and certainly no pressure to buy. It is, however, hard to leave without a supply of Asian groceries or a fine piece of Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese home ware. Asked if there were any negatives to living and working together, both agree that they were aware how easy it was to take disagreements from work home and for this to affect their relationship. They also agreed that the advantages of being in business together far outweighed the disadvantages. When asked about the best part of working together Leslie says, “We have a common vision that constantly evolves.” Marina adds, “Yes, we inspire one another.” Sitting at the back of the store in the cool shade, with their dogs Ruby and Hugo at their feet, Marina and Leslie look relaxed, confident and very much together as business and life partners. Marina gave this advice to anyone going into business: “Follow your passion and follow your individuality.” And asked what they would want if they could have anything, Leslie smiled: “More time to do more creative things.” Marina’s eyes lit up, “I want to be a free spirit in comfort.” A great recipe for couples in business seems to be compatibility, stamina, humour, diversity and love. Good ingredients for work, good ingredients for life.