Can I tell you my story (well the bit to do with Lenah anyway, the rest you don’t want to hear, especially the sordid bits).

I’m a 5th generation beef producer and an Agricultural Science graduate. I’ve worked in the cattle and sheep industries from the NT, through Qld and NSW down to here where I was, before setting up Lenah, the District Agricultural Advisor for the Tas Department of Agriculture at Campbell Town. It was my role to provide whole farm advice to some of the most established sheep producers in the country. A dream job for an ambitious young agriculturalist.

All the farmers I dealt with battled to control the wallaby, possum and deer numbers on their properties because they competed with sheep for the feed resource. But one, a POW survivor of the Burma railway, Dick Lawrence, discussed with me about turning this problem into a resource. I took this idea to a trading program called the Enterprise Workshop and under the guidance of one of Tasmania’s wise old men, with a group of people, wrote a highly refined business plan for Lenah Game Meats.

I decided I was sick of seeing this land flogged by hard hoofed, exotic animals, which don’t belong here, and quit my dream job to set up a business based on producing food from the animals which do belong here.

When we started ‘wallaby’ didn’t exist. The meat we sell was called ‘roo’ and considered good for pet food and maybe patties. However, I had considerable meat science training, I’d done some cute research into factors impacting eating quality in venison, and realised that this ‘roo’ was a whole lot better than just pet meat.

So, we deliberately called it ‘wallaby’ to differentiate it from that other stuff and set about producing products suitable for the restaurant trade, (portioned, trimmed, aged, prime cuts) something which hadn’t been done before.

We started out with a product which didn’t exist, which no-one knew they wanted, which had a lot of baggage, and a grossly under-capitalised business. Marketing 101 would tell you to run away as far from it as you can!

But after 30 years and a huge amount of market development, our wallaby is now in every major Tas supermarket and typically on 100 menus per year.

And here’s the thing, what kept us going through all that time, all those people telling us ‘aw yuck ya can’t eat that’, was a vision. The vision of us, in this land, producing our food, from the animals which belong here.

Don’t get me wrong, we don’t want to see people ‘farm’ wallaby, keep them behind fences and breed bigger and better wallaby. Rather we hope we’ve started to create the markets which could lead to a paradigm change in how farmers view wallaby (and possum). We’d like to see wallaby as a resource to be managed, rather than a pest to be controlled. With further market growth we believe farmers could start to reduce their sheep numbers in some of their ‘run country’, their partially improved semi bush country, dedicate a feed resource to wallaby and manage them to be harvested as a farm enterprise.

Celebrating wallaby as a part of the Tasmanian fine food basket is all about delivering on this vision.