

The Nation

Tsunami victim back to making her popular pastries

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Susan Usher's first attempt at running a business in Thailand was destroyed - literally pulverised - by the tsunami.

The Australian, an adventurer who sailed to southern Thailand with her long-time partner, builder Harry Mackay, set up a small pie shop on Kamala beach in Phuket several years ago.

But her fledgling enterprise was smashed by the huge waves on Boxing Day 2004. Usher, 53, said she was lucky to survive.

"I got swept out the back in the first wave," she said. "Then I ran up the mountain. The second one [wave] flattened the house, and the third one took all the rubble away.

"We lost everything in the tsunami."

Usher, who hails from Adaminaby, not far from Canberra, has lived in Phuket for 14 years. Remarkably, publicity about her drama helped get the business running again.

"A gent from Breville sent a pie machine and others got people to donate equipment. That's how I was able to open my shop again."

Pies are a virtual icon of "Aussie tucker" - ridiculed for their simplicity and popularity with the working class, yet revered by all when the taste is right.

The arrival of millions of migrants has turned Australia into a diverse culture with food and chefs from every part of the globe. But for all the green curries, the pastas, pizzas, falafels, pita bread, kebabs, sushi and spring rolls - nothing is more classically "Oz" than a beer and a pie. And Usher's business celebrates that.

"Lady Pie", as she calls her operation, produces "Australian gourmet pies" - meat, chicken curry, pork and vegetable, plus sausage rolls. They cost Bt80 each - or Bt70 in a wholesale order.

The company takes orders for large events, such as the Johnnie Walker Classic golf tournament held recently at the Blue Canyon resort in Phuket.

And they have special bags so that their pies remain tasty after being frozen and reheated.

Recently, Usher was at the British Club in Bangkok - delivering pies for a charity project in aid of Perth nun Sister Joan Evans, who is perhaps Australia's greatest export to the Land of Smiles.

This small act of generosity highlighted how Usher's business has grown, and the potential it could have.

"It took off far more than we thought," she said. "Initially we thought maybe 400 pies would be good."

After a first batch of 840, orders came for a second batch of 1,200-1,300, largely through volunteer Genevieve Bulluss and her friends in the Australian and New Zealand Women's Group.

In the end more than 2,000 pies were sold - and Sister Joan received a cheque for Bt100,000. The money will go to pay for school uniforms for children who live in the Klong Toei slum.

Sister Joan sponsors the education of more than 600 poor children, so the money is much needed.

Usher was happy to get new customers. Things are on the up, but making pies is hot work - 50 degrees Celsius in the kitchen, she said.

"I started out with one part-time assistant, but now have six, working in three shop houses. We're making about 4,000 a month.

"It's possible we may export them to Laos also, as there are two mines there operated by Aussies and they have about 1,500 men working there - Australians. They want 400 sample pies."

What's interesting is her business has a growing popularity among locals. "We're getting a lot of Thai customers now. The other day it was just all Thai people."

Usher, who has no children, said her partner Harry was happy to see her busy and making money. "He's taken to calling himself 'Lord Pie'," she said with a grin.

Jim Pollard

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