

OUTthere



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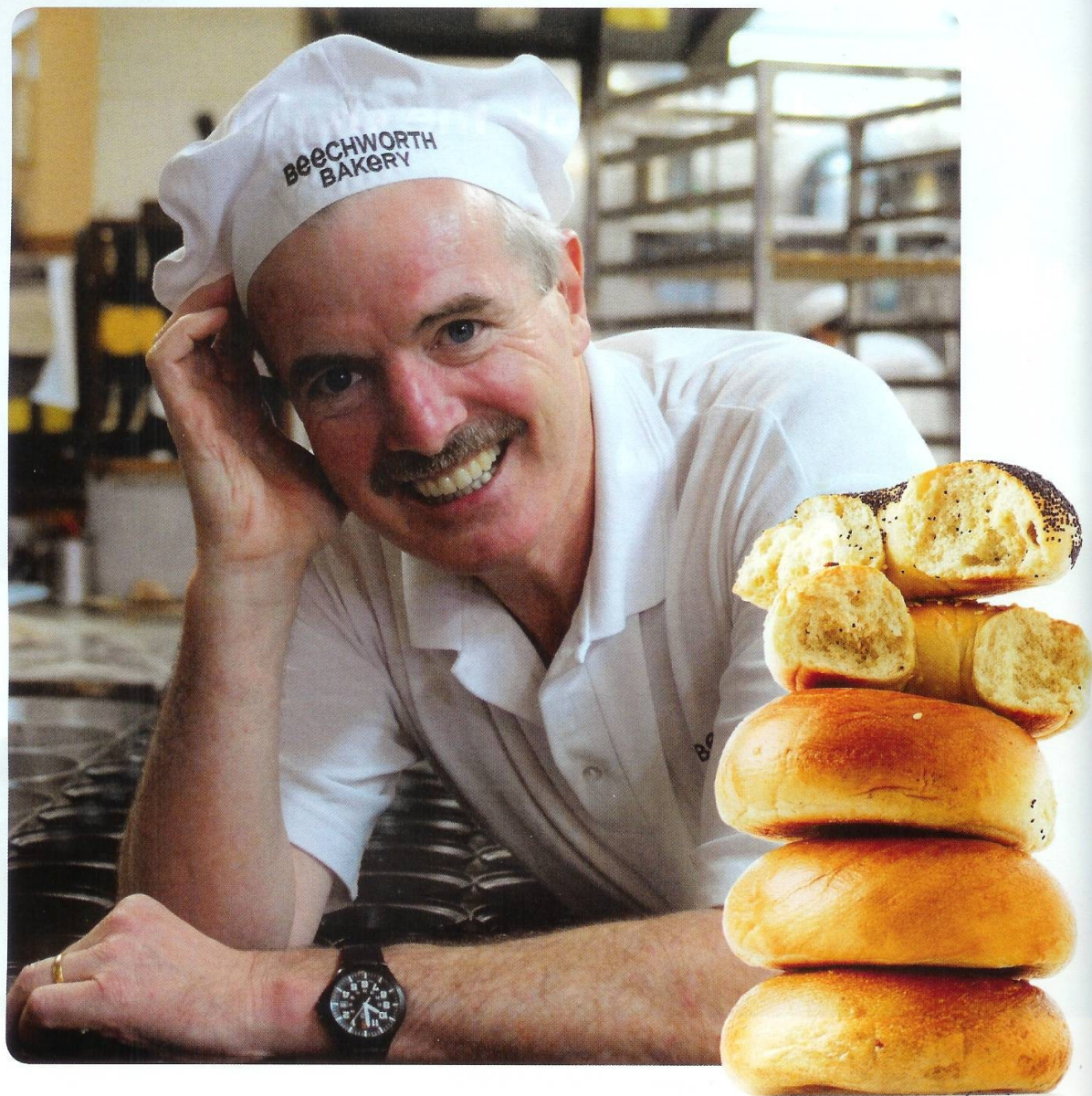
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Tackling the
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High winds and
World Wars



Baker's Take On Life

Tom O'Toole grabs every opportunity that comes his way

70

COUNTRYBIZ february 09

Tom O'Toole sees the sunny side of life. He's a 'glass is half full' kind of bloke with an 'up and at 'em' attitude who works actively to weed out negativity from his life.

He is refusing to take part in the economic doom and gloom written in the newspapers and won't have a bar of the recession.

Tom, best known as the owner of the infamous Beechworth Bakery in country Victoria, is also a popular figure on the public speaking circuit.

It is his incredible business success in a situation where the doomsayers were predicting failure combined with his can-do, have-a-go attitude that keeps him in demand and sees him travelling the length and breadth of Australia – and the world – to share his insights.

"It's an attitude," he says of his positive outlook. "An attitude of gratitude. If I'm grateful, I have energy, I'm inspired, I'm raring to go."

And Tom is certainly high energy. He talks a mile a minute and is bursting with enthusiasm. His speech is peppered with so many positive quotes he's like a walking, talking book of affirmations.

They include gems like: "attitude is the mind's paint brush – it can colour any situation".

But don't think he's some new-age hippy.

Tom, who professes to being "56 going on 20", is a fair dinkum country bloke who was raised in poverty at Tocumwal in northern Victoria and left school at 14 not knowing his alphabet or his times tables.

What sets him apart is that he's chosen to focus on the positives in life. But it wasn't always this way.

"I was a negative bugger," he says.

He knows what it's like to be in the lowest of lows. Tom was on the verge of taking his own life after his first marriage collapsed.

"I was suicidal and homicidal."

It was Lifeline and some extensive counselling that pulled him through.

While he exudes positivity nearly three decades later, Tom is the first to admit that he has to work at it every day.

"I have to be really, really careful to keep away from the dream takers and the energy suckers."

Fortunately, he has found someone to share the dream with – his second wife Christine, "a fourth generation Beechworthian". The couple have two grown sons.

In business

After leaving school, Tom washed bottles at the Tocumwal Cordial Factory before securing himself an apprenticeship with a baker.

It was his purchase of the Beechworth Bakery in the '80s that shot him to notoriety. People thought he was headed for disaster.

"They said, 'Tom, you're overcapitalising in a town that's dying,'" he laughs.

"They thought I was mad. Today they think I'm a guru."

He is accredited with breathing life into that dying town. Beechworth was a bit jaded when he bought the bakery. Back then the business employed two part-time people and had a turnover of \$100,000. Today it employs 70 full and part time staff and the Beechworth Bakery is credited with having the highest retail sales for a stand-alone bakery in Australia. Although, Tom thinks there are a few others doing better.

"We turn over well in excess of \$3 million cash over the counter. It's just a retail (business) in a little town of less than 3,000 (people)."

The enterprise has grown to include another five Beechworth bakeries, one in Albury and the rest scattered throughout regional Victoria. Combined, they turn over about \$10 million.

"I saw Beechworth in fresh eyes – so many opportunities," Toms says.

"The thing is there are so many opportunities out there if you're willing to have a go."

The naysayers were out again when he was invited to buy an Echuca bakery that wasn't doing well.

"People said, 'you cannot duplicate what you've got down in Beechworth'."

They also said he couldn't call it the Beechworth Bakery. But he did – it is his brand name after all – and it is doing so well it might surpass Beechworth.

"I'm as thick as a brick," Tom says in his self-deprecating way. Although, it is clear he is not. He might not be able to read the alphabet (he's dyslexic) but Tom knows a thing or two about people and his great insight has led him on the path to business success.

"It's a bakery, it's not rocket science. They want it fresh, they want it now and they want it with a smile," he says.

It's about treating people right and that includes his staff. He's a big fan of training for staff and giving them empowerment.

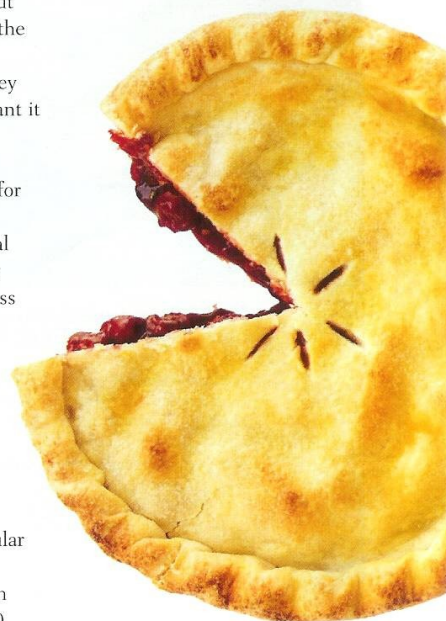
Tom enjoys no longer having a managerial role in the business and has taken on Marty Matassoni, a former apprentice, as a business partner in a 75/25 per cent split.

He's also not one to keep tabs on the money side of the business and shocked a financial planner at one of his speeches who couldn't believe he didn't know what percentage of profit he made on each pie.

Public speaking

It is his insight that also makes him so popular on the speaking circuit. Tom's popularity hasn't diminished in the decade he has been a professional speaker. He does close to 100 engagements a year.

“The thing is there are so many opportunities out there if you’re willing to have a go.”



PROFILE

Gerry Morris ICMI Speakers and Entertainers Queensland franchise owner says Tom's a one-off.

"We think he's pretty amazing. I think the biggest thing is he's so genuine."

Also he is still in business so his experiences are real. But Tom's explanation for his success is much simpler.

"People love a good story and I'm a story teller."

Certainly he's able to capture his audience – everyone from general store owners to CEOs of large corporations get something out of Tom's speeches.

"When he talks he's been described as John Cleese on speed," Gerry says.

Tom works at his speaking like he works at his business and his life – constantly reviewing and updating.

Gerry says Tom carries a notepad everywhere, writing and reviewing his goals and every morning he reads two pages from affirmation-style books as a kick-start for the day.

"He doesn't watch the news – the same doom and gloom for the last 25 years. He just doesn't let the bad stuff in."

This doesn't mean he's not aware of what's happening, he just chooses not to dwell on it. And it's in the down times that he says businesses need to put on their biggest smiles.

Giving back

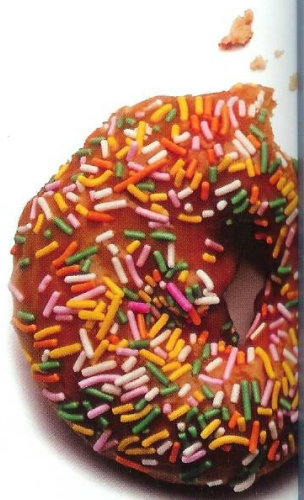
He's a man with no hobbies, except a daily bushwalk and a love of travel and family.

"I like holidays. I work hard and I rest easy. I realise I'm going to be dead a long time."

But there is plenty to keep Tom busy. In between business commitments, speaking engagements and travel, Tom manages to fit in charity work, doing a lot for Lifeline, the organisation that turned his life around and regularly talks to prisoners.

At the end of the day he is grateful that he lives in Australia, a land of opportunity and has a lot of time for anyone that's willing to have a go.

For those sinking in negativity, who think life can never be as sunny as Tom sees it, remember being positive is a choice he made. And it's paying dividends. ■



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