



MISSION Possible

Debbie Kruger goes a few rounds with a man who's fighting his way to the top of the boxing business. Photography by Suzanna Clarke

Allan Yarrington doesn't look the nostalgic type.

But ask him why he's collecting boxes, and a story about Australia's recent past is brought to life through his reply. The self-titled Box King of Byron Bay, New South Wales, and his business of the same name, has turned a spontaneous purchase of 3,000 Cottee's crates from a cordial factory in Casino four years ago into a mission to document the unusual history of the Australian soft-drink industry.

Allan has 40,000 wooden crates piled up outside his rented factory on Byron's outskirts, and thousands more in storage elsewhere. His collection provides an insight into a time when Australia had more than 600 soft-drink companies and lemonade was really made with lemons.

Allan has transformed his beautifully cleaned, oiled and painted crates into storage boxes for spuds, onions, bread, flour, herbs, CDs and blankets. They even make great shelving, bedside cabinets, wheelbarrows and trays.

Allan's thriving business



keeps him busy enough, but he also plans to establish a soft-drink museum. The stories behind each collection of boxes, the thousands of unusual bottles he has hidden away and the authentic machinery he is restoring will form the collection's foundation. Allan says the museum will even have a bar selling soft drinks made from original recipes.

A father of four who moved his family to the north coast of New South Wales from Sydney, Allan was once a jack-of-all-trades who won a contract to demolish a slipway at Ballina. He began recycling the disused timber he was dismantling for the house he wanted to build in Byron Bay, which took eight years to complete. In the meantime, his foray into working with timber gave him the idea of how to turn 3,000 Cottee's crates into cash. He saw potential in the boxes and sold them to shops wanting to use them for free-standing shelving.

"I realised I was on to something, so I rang Telecom and asked them to send me every telephone book they had in Australia," he says. "When I got all the books, I started to ring up every soft-drink company I could find. I spent over a week on the phone, and I think it cost me about \$900 in calls."

Allan discovered that most of the wooden soft-drink boxes were destroyed after the introduction of plastic crates in the late 1960s. "I suppose there were once millions of boxes in the country. When you think about all the soft-drink companies there once were ... I was probably 10 years too late, because most of them had burnt their crates. But I still managed to get quite a few from companies that had them out the back in sheds, or were still using them, or were phasing them out, or were just burning them when they got around to it.

"I rang one chap in Sydney and he'd burnt 100,000 boxes. He described the box to me — a Cottee's Passiona box that was dated — and at that time I was getting about \$10 a box for those. We made quite a joke out of it because he'd virtually burnt \$1 million worth of boxes — and he'd thought he was pretty clever burning the biggest fire in Sydney!"

Nevertheless, Allan was able to track down thousands of other boxes. Then it was a matter of travelling the country to inspect them and organise freight to get them home. He has now done several trips through Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, not only picking up boxes and, often, the empty bottles still stacked in them from decades ago but also discarded machinery.

His pride and joy is a syphoning machine bought in Gosford from the son of an original factory owner. "The son was 70, and he said that as a kid he used to operate that machine. He used to do 30 dozen bottles an hour.

"Sometimes I walk into a factory and I'm like a kid in a candy shop," Allan says, eyes sparkling. "When a liquidator rang me about Tinson's cordial factory at Quirindi, which had been operating for over a hundred years, I went out there and there were about 2,000 boxes dating back to the late 1930s. I was very excited."

Allan's goal is to get at least one soft-drink box from every company that ever existed in Australia. He has crates from Werris Creek, where the soft-drink manufacturer fashioned boxes out of old explosives boxes. He also has crates that were recycled back in the 1930s from boxes belonging to oil companies, such as Shell. "They're great, I won't sell them. They're too rare."

Large orders for Box King's distinctive pieces have allowed Allan to put on extra staff at his factory. Trade fairs around the country are a boon, too. But at times, the daily

grind of preparing and selling his unusual product takes him away from his dream museum project ... but then there's always a reminder.

"It's interesting the amount of people that actually come up to you and shake your hand and say, look, what you're doing is absolutely fabulous. Particularly people who have been aligned to the industry somehow. People always like to reminisce with you about their days and their memories about soft drinks. And I haven't come across a person who didn't like Cottee's Passiona. It had the little pips in it; it was beautiful."



Above: Allan Yarrington, the self-proclaimed king of boxes. Below left: Old boxes transformed offer new uses. Below right: Daughter Elisha with a box of home-grown herbs



