

Mal Paterson – BiltongCanada.com

Six years ago, Mal Paterson and her husband came to Canada from South Africa. In order to settle into their new country they had to come up with a business idea quickly as it was a condition of their immigration.

While searching out business possibilities, they discovered that Canada did not have a favourite South African treat, biltong; beef slices marinated in salt, vinegar and spices then hung to air dry.

“Our vision was to supply South Africans throughout Canada with memories of South Africa with our biltong,” says Paterson. “In South Africa, you would never sit down to watch a rugby match without a big bag of it! It’s very much a comfort food.” They thought there would be enough South Africans in Canada wanting their native comfort food to make it a viable business.

They purchased a house in Cranbrook that had the bones for their business operation, but very little else. It needed to be built practically from scratch. As it turned out, this would only be a small hiccup compared to passing Canadian food inspection and health regulations.

“Because our product is 100 per cent natural, has no preservatives or chemicals and is not smoked like traditional jerky, it’s unlike other meat products in Canada,” recognizes Paterson. “We had to jump through many hoops to meet the regulations and then had to send it out to two different laboratories so the government could make sure we wouldn’t be killing the population!”

Not only did the biltong easily pass the lab tests, but the tests also helped prove what a fantastic product it is. When Mal and Rod launched biltongcanada.com four years ago, word quickly spread that this natural, high protein, low fat snack was now available.

“We expected to get lots of business from South Africans in Canada and we did; they love the stuff and buy it by the kilo! What we didn’t expect was for another niche market to appear,” admits Paterson.

Now biltongcanada.com is poised for expansion. When a team leader for a group running a marathon in the Arctic – over six days on foot running over 430 miles – made a huge order for biltong, it got Paterson and her husband thinking. “Our product allowed his team to eat while running in -35c weather and never had to waste time to stop and cook a meal like his competitors,” says Paterson. “This opened up a whole new market. We’re planning on exploring adventure sport participants, the Canadian Army and Search and Rescue as potential clients.”

Paterson is also expanding her product range to include boerewors (boora-vors), a sausage made of beef, pork and natural spices, droëwors (drewa-vors), air-dried sausage similar to pepperoni and Hotstix, a spiced dried beef-like jerky.

Although they have come a long way since they landed in Canada, Paterson says that getting as far as they have has been anything but easy. “In business you hit brick walls; obstacles that you have to push through and seem insurmountable, but you need to just keep pushing through. It’s like childbirth: you can give a half-hearted push but all you do is prolong the pain and labour. But if you give a real whole-hearted push, it speeds up the labour and gets you to your goal a lot faster.”

She also acknowledges that this business never would have come to fruition without the support of her family, especially her husband, Rod. “The bigger our business grows the more that we have to grow with it. My husband has been incredible. His strengths are my weaknesses and vice versa. I couldn’t be doing this without him. “