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NATURAL TOUCH: Sandy Leatham (right) is tasting success with the natural produce from her Benalla business, Hook and Spoon. Everything from fresh packaged meat to bottled sauces are really hitting the spot, and ensuring assistant Rosalie Thomas (left) is kept busy. ■ Full story page 2.

Sandy slow cooks success

By DON HEATH

SANDY Leatham has spent her entire life with natural farm produce all around her.

So it is no wonder this energetic woman is making a success of her recently established 'natural' food business in Benalla, Hook and Spoon.

"I was brought up on a small dairy farm in Kingston, south of Hobart, where my parents separated and bottled cream, in what I remember as, a dingy little room out the back," she said.

"They then loaded it into our car (no refrigeration) and we delivered to local



HANGING AROUND: Sandy Leatham checks the progress of her mutton hanging at Hook and Spoon.

shops and into Hobart."

Since those early memories, Sandy has worked at and on a variety of projects, such as an environmentally friendly

pest control business, running a host farm and also a catering business.

About 10 years ago she, and her then husband Bob, moved to Victoria and

settled in Boho.

"We have always lived on a farm, so we looked all around Victoria for somewhere suitable," Sandy said.

"We purchased the 700ha in Boho because we believe hill-country is healthy and ran cattle and sheep for a number of years."

Three years ago the 'retail bug' struck again and Sandy set up Hook and Spoon, so named because the meat is 'off the hook' with a 'spoonful' of homemade sauce.

"It was the appearance of the old, vacant butcher shop in Carrier Street which fired my imagination, so it seemed a natural kind of business to establish there," she said.

Sandy now sells clean, fresh, home grown meat and sausages, home made pies, sauces and other produce suitable for people wishing to cook or eat the 'old fashioned way'.

"In fact what we offer is apparently termed 'slow food' but even without a label it's tasty" she said.

"All the meat comes from my own property, now just 250ha following a parting of the ways with Bob, and the only 'outside' purchase is Berkshire pork.

"We make all the pastry and pasta here, as well as all the sauces and relish, and I have established a herb garden at the back of the shop for those ingredients.

"In fact, everything is made from scratch.

"I believe you don't need to add too much to good meat, perhaps a bit of salt and pepper and a few

herbs and spices, because the flavors are already built in."

Sandy also focuses on mutton not lamb, because of the same reason, flavor.

"I use my own Merino mutton (fine wool, fine muscles), they've been shorn for a few years, then processed at the shop - it's great meat and takes less from the environment than running ewes and lambs," she said.

"In fact there is actually a Mutton Renaissance Society, supported by chefs such as Jamie Oliver, who are returning to the old ways."

Sandy now employs a butcher three or four days a week and also has three part time 'kitchen hands' to assist in preparation and sales.

"The difference with the meat we sell and use is that it is prepared from the point of view of the cook and not a butcher," she said.

"The beef is hung for 21 days, never less, which follows CSIRO guidelines, and the mutton is hung on the bone for 12 days.

"And the sausages are all preservative and gluten free."

Sandy said most of her meat is sold in cyrovac, because she sells at farmer's markets in places like Albury, Tatong, Mansfield and Collingwood and it's easier to transport and stays fresh much longer.

"We also give our recipes to any interested customers," she said.

Hook and Spoon delivers to families and work places in Melbourne and Mansfield.