

SECRET RECIPE

COVID-19 shook Maud Edmiston's bakery business more than anything in 50 years, but the Swedish Miss always believed her shops & staff would prevail



“What you think and what you do has impact, and you are in charge of your own life. MAUD EDMISTON

Steve Butler



The simple principles that made Swedish miss, Maud Edmiston, a WA icon are at the centre of her fightback against the coronavirus that threatened to end her delicious nearly 50-year-old business.

Better known as “Miss Maud”, Mrs Edmiston affords herself a long pause before admitting the COVID-19 shutdown — and the uncertainty when it hit — had created her toughest business challenge since she opened her first store in City Arcade in 1971.

“Of course it was heart-breaking and the consequences for everyone was difficult, not only for the business but for every single person,” Mrs Edmiston explained candidly this week in an exclusive interview with *The Sunday Times* after declaring her popular restaurants back open for business.

“But what you think and what you do has impact, and you are in charge of your own life. If you don’t understand

that is so, you are missing and you are the victim.

“The coronavirus has slapped all of us, but now it’s up to you and what you do next.”

The 19-shop chain that had employed thousands of West Australians over the decades had suddenly been left on its knees because of COVID-19, facing an even bigger challenge than when it went into receivership with a \$7 million debt based around a soured Cottesloe property deal in 1988. That had been exacerbated by rising interest rates, the global financial crisis of a year earlier and overspending.

But just two months ago, the sale of her flagship Murray Street hotel and restaurant for a reported \$10 million two years ago looked distant in the rear-vision mirror.

Mrs Edmiston had to stand down 500 staff members and, unlike when she faced those past financial battles, this time she had no shop front to help her trade back into the black. That’s when the simple stoic pragmatism that had been her key business partner again became her most powerful asset, alongside her unwavering faith in her business model and the people she had chosen to come along with her for the ride.

“It was very different, but that it was the end (of the business) was not part of any option for me,” she said



bluntly. “It was more, ‘Where is the road going from here and how is it going to work?’.”

“It was also very important for me with the staff because everyone was bewildered and didn’t know what to do. So to have confidence is very important when you have as much staff as I have.

“My staff had a calm confidence that we would get through this, and they knew (that) because I was there every day. You just have to clear the

OF MISS MAUD



Clockwise from above: Maud Edmiston with bakehouse staff. At her Karrinyup outlet this week. With her 1984 America's Cup trophy cake. At one of her first cafes in the 1970s. Cooking up cakes with staff in 1993. Making the world's largest chocolate crackle for Telethon in 1992. Main picture: Danella Bevis



fog and find out what could be done and get back into cash flow. And you can't do that if you don't have the belief.

"Now everything is so lovely again and life is as it should be. Our whole industry is going through a rebirth and something good will come of that."

All of the food across the chain was donated to Foodbank and Mrs Edmiston used the temporary closures to orchestrate an almost industrial-strength cleaning of all of her outlets.

The Federal Government's Jobkeeper scheme helped keep the business afloat, while the coronavirus lockdown also inadvertently built an online sales arm to her business, which has continued to hold through her chain's public reopening.

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We meet Mrs Edmiston on a Thursday afternoon at her bustling new Karrinyup Shopping Centre restaurant. Her hair is, as always, immaculately crafted and she is all business power in her red jacket with matching rims on her spectacles.

Her uber-friendly staff seem naturally in tune — not just because she is there — and customers almost fawn over the fact that the famous face on the cake boxes and bags is present.

While she occasionally gets lost in the memories of her former Stockholm home as she looks at paintings of the Swedish city she has had done to adorn the shop walls, she seems oblivious to the fact she is being constantly watched.

But she is courteous in the extreme in response to every customer approach. Some of them secretly take mobile phone pictures of her over their seating partitions, but others can simply not resist the temptation of meeting one of Perth's most mysterious celebrities.

First, it is an Indian man who can barely hold the cake box he has just acquired as he trembles with strange excitement. The man's eyes widen as he asks me if it is really Miss Maud, with her standing almost by his shoulder listening to the question.

His wife then seizes the initiative and almost demands I take a picture of them with her. The man does not speak again and then a twin sister of one of Mrs Edmiston's longest-serving employees chimes in to introduce herself and to tell her, "You're beautiful".

Then an elderly man, seemingly too frail to get up in time to capture his moment, beckons Mrs Edmiston to his table to say hello. You can't see through his dark glasses, but his facial features build the picture of a delighted gaze.

And then two pre-10 siblings excitedly bee-line her with their mother, who explains they "just had to" meet Miss Maud. With the stretched smiles and eyes, she could well have been Father Christmas.

All the while, she never misses a hospitality beat or changes her calm, happy expression.

During our interview, she occasionally sips a chai latte, with the word "chai" written perfectly by one of her baristas in the top of the froth.

She takes the opportunity to proudly talk about how she has trained 40 new baristas through her staff network during the shutdown, always clearly looking for ways to improve the business.

Mrs Edmiston's old-school simplicity is refreshing in what has become a more complicated and fast-paced business world. And her memories of an extraordinary West Australian life are vivid on every reflection.

We had barely sat down before she produced a menu from The Colonial Ball of 1979, where the Historical Society asked her to cater with offerings that would have been presented 150 years earlier back in 1829. She even had a picture of then WA Premier Sir Charles Court and his wife Lady Rita dancing while dressed in full 1800s costume.

The menu featured a galantine of game, rabbit pies, suckling pigs, black bread and Stilton cheese with port.

"It was a really big historical event... magnificent," she croons as if it had been held just yesterday.

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Mrs Edmiston says The Colonial Ball was likely the moment she felt confidence that her business was being recognised as a true part of WA's rapid economic growth of the time. But being part of that had been little more than a fluke.

She had been working in international tourism — a vocation she

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described as "the university of life" — when she and her now late American husband Ken had been sitting in Phoenix, Arizona, and talking about finding a "new frontier".

The adventurous couple landed an almost random pinpoint on WA's Eighty Mile Beach, on the State's North West coast, and their new destination was set in 1968.

A taxi driver from Perth Airport took them to the Parmelia Hotel and Mrs Edmiston has lived in WA ever since. She even remembers having lamb cutlets from a trolley for breakfast the following morning.

"I thought it was delicious," she said.

Mrs Edmiston still has not been to Eighty Mile Beach, but after initially finding upon a Swedish pastry chef living in Perth, her business has built into one of the State's most enduring hospitality brands.

She maintains she opened it when she and her mother Rut had been frustrated by a lack of ladies' lunching options in the then "country town" of Perth.

"We were trotting around Perth looking for a coffee and a 'something' and there was nothing," she recalled. "I walked into City Arcade and decided I wanted to do one (a shop)."

Mrs Edmiston said she was confident from the outset of being able to run a good business, but admitted some anxiety as to whether she could get the right equipment back-of-house on which to found the project. But WA's rise as an international oil hotspot had been fortunate timing fuel for local business.

Still, it was always simplicity in her business outlook and a resilience to deal with whatever adversity presented that underpinned her rise and padded support around any falls. Like other notable WA business identities such as Dale Alcock and Jim Kidd, she consciously put her name to the business and accepted the risk to her personal reputation.

While she admitted some food delivery had evolved with the times in terms of vegetarian and vegan options, her core business had never changed.

"I knew what people like myself needed, and I created this based upon that... that still guides me today," she said.

"Just straight away what I thought was nice and what I thought was good to eat. But it is really always just the personal connection with the customers, that was from day one and that's why I put my name Miss Maud on the line and undertook to have that relationship with them.

"People have not changed, people are the same and they want to be in a place where they feel safe, comfortable and it's beautiful and a treat. And Miss Maud is a treat.

"You have fads going through, but I'm not interested in fads and I've never been tempted. It's quite simple, really. And in the evolution of business, you have to be awake, you have to be an optimist and believe it can be done and at the same time, you have to hold the rudder steady and hold your line.

"A lot of people ask why I still



do it. Is there a better life than what I've got? I don't think so. It's not to feed myself or my family, it's fun and so rewarding."

Mrs Edmiston went on to explain that the name of the business was her husband's

suggestion, but she could not remember his reasoning for it. And she denied she ever clinically crafted her brand, saying it came from an organic build through her life values.

She remembered once building a seven-tier cake to raise money for Telethon, which Australian pop legend John Farnham cut into pieces that sold for

20c each. But despite an impressive photograph alongside a cake replica her business made of the America's Cup, further discussion reveals it was ultimately a disappointment.

Her face crinkles into a genuine cringe when she recalls how she was talked out of constructing a giant cake copy of the whole Australia II yacht, winged keel and all.

"I have no sense of limitation," she lamented. "But they quietly took me down to earth."

She also once attempted to make the world's biggest chocolate crackle, which compacted so sturdily as it dried that a jack-hammer was needed to remove pieces for children at Telethon to taste.

Her coffee bean poll for federal elections has also become a political institution where her customers have successfully predicted all but Kevin Rudd's 2007 victory in national votes in the past 30 years. They even got Scott Morrison right last year, despite his victory over Bill

Shorten coming as a major shock.

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With an apology for being "boring", she reveals her personal favourite Miss Maud treat is her signature Princess sponge cake, complete with green marzipan covering.

Her first chef produced it back in 1971 and it has been a staple of the business ever since, made always with the same passed-down recipe she still has in its original hand-written form on a scrap piece of paper. The Mazarin almond cake in a shortbread pastry shell and topped with a white fondant icing and a glace cherry, has been another long-time favourite and the Queen Silvia cake first made to herald the 1989 arrival of the woman who is now Sweden's



Clockwise from below: Maud Edmiston in the 1970s. When she was named as 1992 Qantas/Bulletin Australian Businesswoman of the Year. Maud with Johnny Farnham and Fat Cat in 1981. Being awarded a workplace best practice award from then-Prime Minister.



longest-serving queen, was a more sentimental product.

Mrs Edmiston refuses to discuss her age, claiming the number matters little in the scheme of life. She happily reveals her WA landing and business opening dates, but then leaves it to others to do the approximate math if they care.

She believed the "good morals" of her Swedish homeland had helped her make good life and business decisions and said it was her travel industry background which instilled her bullish can-do attitude.

"I value travel for young people," she said. "You learned how to think, you learned how to solve problems. There was no easy way, but you made things happen."

Mrs Edmiston is now a grandmother of five and that, as well as fishing, is where she says she finds her life balance. She claims

she has three families, including her staff and her customers.

She delighted in explaining how she invests in her staff members, constantly allowing them to suggest changes and improvements regardless of rank or length of employment. And it is clear the business she has long treated as her "playground" is still exactly that.

"Miss Maud to me as a whole business and development . . . it's a life and a life where I've taken my staff and my customers with me," she said "It has been inter-generational where we have had grandparents and parents and children. I say to my grandchildren that you must find something you love and you have to enjoy putting your leg out of bed to go to work and feeling you're part of it."