



Cynthia Baur and David Lester in their Golden Bay home.

A life with candles

Words: DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER

The soft, soothing glow of candlelight links us back through the ages to ancient times, when life was quieter and simpler. And today, in the midst of our modern, fast-paced world, candlelight can still bring a calming, peaceful and nourishing presence into our lives.

Cynthia Baur, owner and CEO of Living Light Candles in Golden Bay, first came across a small company called Living Light Candles at a gift show in Christchurch, 22 years ago. She was so struck by the beauty of the product, that she placed an order of 77 candles for a gift store she co-owned in Auckland.

That order led to meeting the owner of the company, Heinz Oertli, then a connection, dating and marriage. They set up shop in a converted pottery studio, with a total of three customers and one employee. Cynthia, who had a sales and marketing background, became the front person and the business grew from three customers to 50 in one year. Then the next year, the numbers doubled again.

Persisting through challenges

As they scrambled to keep up and added more help, they moved the growing business to a large factory. When Cynthia's husband became unwell, she took over running the company. He died in 2010.

For the next seven years, Cynthia believed in the vision and the products, but it was easy to get discouraged as she worked to master all the aspects of both candle making and business management.

"One day a woman came into the gallery, looked at me and said, 'Darling, you are making so many people happy with what you are doing.' I so needed that encouragement and it inspired me to carry on," Cynthia says.

A great partnership

In 2017, she married David Lester, who became involved in the company and provided welcome emotional support and stability.

"David's beautiful support has allowed me to focus on the business and turn it around," Cynthia says.

She also brought in a consultant from Nelson, who implemented an inventory system, to calculate the accurate cost of goods and all the other information needed to ensure a strong bottom line.

"The system showed me the products that weren't selling that well, so we could streamline and make important changes," Cynthia says.

With the new systems in place and David's support, profits have been climbing; 2020 was their best year yet, even in the midst of Covid-19.

Art and science

"The process of candle making is both art and science," Cynthia says.

For example, the four kinds of beeswax, also soy and plant wax, each require a different handling. Add to that, thousands of different kinds of cotton wicks, each one calling for different adjustments to the recipe, then add in a fragrance, which can also change the results. Many different types of molds create another variable. The walls of the factory have to maintain the even temperature inside, also an important factor.

The test room, where they try out variations in waxes, jars, wicks and fragrances, feels like a tiny chapel, a quiet space amid the busy factory, lit up with more than fifty candles.

“ Our vision is to offer world class New Zealand hand-made products of light and scents, to create a gift of affordable luxury, which reflects natural living, inspires the senses and nurtures the human spirit. ”

Cynthia Baur, owner and CEO,
Living Light Candles



Nelson Store Manager, Jude Biggs.

"We have to be very precise and assess every change we make," Cynthia says.

Icicle candles and fragrances

The icicle candles, the company's most popular product, go out as fast as they can produce them. They recently exported over 7,000 to a distributor in Australia, each carefully tissue wrapped in single boxes. The icicles come in twelve colors and are finished by hand, with all extra wax recycled.

The company creates blends using high-end perfumes and essential oils for their quality, non-toxic fragrances.

"The fragrances sell the products," Cynthia says. "For each fragrance, we now offer candles, body lotion, hand cream, a body bar, room spray, room diffuser, aroma stones and diffusers for small spaces, all both eco-friendly and luxurious."

Success secrets

"Our success reflects both the quality of the product and the quality of the people who make them," Cynthia says. "We look for integrity and the ability to be a good team member."

Once a month company-wide meetings help maintain the alignment, with individual departments meeting more often.

"We care about the environment and use eco-friendly packaging," Cynthia says. "All our candles are, bio-degradable and burn carbon-free."

The company's packaging design won a Luxury Gold Award, in 2017. They also were finalists for the Australian Life In Style—Body, Bath, & Fragrance Award that year.

A proud Kiwi

"I have been here 40 years and am so proud to be a Kiwi. The nature, the people, the 'can do' attitude," Cynthia says. "The diversity of the landscape, mountains, desert—it is all here."

Advice to budding businesses

"Trust your intuition, believe in your dreams, (even when others don't) and be brave, bold and kind," Cynthia says. "I feel a sense of gratitude for the company and for each person who works at Living Light."

As the large orders keep coming in from Australia, she remembers the woman who helped her years ago with her words of encouragement.

"She really was an angel that day," Cynthia says. "If I could see her again, I'd say, 'Thank you. It is happening now'."

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Koria from Living Light's Golden Bay factory.