

Alfa Belgium, the country's sole AGA supplier and the brand's most successful international dealership, is not only a business success – it is a triumph of family values, fostered in the warmth of the very cookers that it now sells.

Our story begins, formally, in the '70s when the recently married Paule Vanwelden-Velghe embarked on fulfilling her desire to own her very own AGA cooker. But this came as a result of an experience that began much earlier, in her childhood home: "My love of the AGA comes from the family," she explains. "I loved the warmth, and my mother always prepared delicious food using it – apparently without any effort!"

AGA cookers were sold in Belgium before and after the Second World War – indeed, Paule points out that the brand was available there even before it graced the UK market – but by the time she came to seek one they had completely disappeared from the European market. "We didn't even know if they were still produced!" she declares. "Because don't forget, this was a time before the internet."

Second-hand ones, however, were obtainable, and it was not unusual for existing owners to purchase them just for spare parts, in case their AGA ever required maintenance. Paule, as an owner-to-be, also managed to source her first solid fuel AGA in this way, hoping to repair it and one day have it installed in her home.

During a holiday to Morocco, Paule and her husband met and befriended a couple from Scotland, whom they subsequently invited to Belgium. While touring the house the couple spotted Paule's dismantled AGA standing forlornly in the garage, and asked why she had not bought a new one instead. Exclaiming, "Hey! They are still produced? Where can I buy one?!" she was promptly handed a telephone number by her Scottish friends.

With no local distributor at that time, it took two years to finally complete her purchase and take delivery of her new AGA,



Family values

Paule Vanwelden-Velghe, founder of Belgian AGA dealership Alfa Belgium, and her daughter **Peggy Vanwelden**, who now runs the business, have built their lives upon the joys of AGA life, as *Louise Hoffman* discovers in conversation with them

and what began as a simple desire to recreate the warmth of her childhood for her own family became a new business venture in 1978: Alfa Belgium.

AT THE HEART OF THE FAMILY

Speaking with Paule's daughter, Peggy Vanwelden, who now runs the business having joined at the age of 18, it is clear that Paule achieved both of her aims to a far greater extent than she could possibly have imagined. Not only did she establish a company that, thanks to her determined and entrepreneurial spirit, grew to become a huge success, but the AGA cooker she had striven to obtain ignited within her daughter a similar fire of passion for the brand and all that it has come to represent.

As a child, Peggy enjoyed the AGA without necessarily recognising its importance: "A lot of things happen around the AGA, in the kitchen, and so it is part of growing up. However, as a child you quickly get used to it being there and so you don't fully appreciate the benefits the cooker gives you, such as the atmosphere and all of the things you can do with it," she explains. "For instance if as a child you sit down on a cushion in front of the AGA with the dog on your lap and a book to read, you are leaning against something that is warm and comfortable, but you are not thinking 'this is an AGA'. When you choose to warm your gloves on it before going to school when it's cold outside, you aren't thinking 'this is an AGA'. You live with it, and mum cooks the food using it – it's part of the family without thinking about it."

As an adult, moving out of the family home and facing the prospect of leaving the warmth of the AGA, the reality of its role becomes fully evident, however; and for Peggy this meant choosing her first home with her husband almost entirely on the basis of the presence of a chimney.

"After all, I couldn't live in a house without a chimney because I needed one for my AGA!" she exclaims, adding: "This is not the case nowadays of course, because AGA cookers have evolved and you don't need external venting for the new models."

And it wasn't long before the AGA proved its worth to Peggy yet again – in a new way. Shortly after moving into their chosen house, her husband accidentally ran into a pheasant while driving his grass mower. It survived, but flew away, and left behind a nest with six unhatched eggs.


Having been told by a knowledgeable relative that the frightened bird was unlikely to return, and that the eggs would therefore never hatch due to the very exact temperature that they require, animal-lover Peggy was undeterred in jumping to action: "We were very sure that it would work using an AGA, because everything works with an AGA. So we put the isolation plate on in the hot cupboard on the left hand side with a lot of water, because you need some humidity for the eggs, and placed them inside.

"Despite it being extremely rare for all of the eggs to hatch, we ended up with six babies."

Indeed, Peggy went on to save the lives of many other creatures, including a crow and a kitten, using her AGA cooker.

THAT AGA FEELING

Ask any AGA owner and they will have similar anecdotes to share. For example, Paule tells the story of the man who was faced with the prospect of leaving his house for some time while abroad, and was so concerned that his AGA would suffer some kind of untimely demise in the hands of a third party that he dismantled it and buried it in the garden, to be retrieved upon his return.

She also extols the many virtues of the AGA for mothers, who can sit near the warm cooker while feeding their babies, and, as 





Peggy adds, can dry baby clothes upon it.

“Because it’s always on, the AGA is a real presence,” Peggy continues. “It’s like an open fireplace: when lit, the fire lends the room an atmosphere that a radiator cannot. It’s the feeling it gives – the fact that you come into a place and it’s not cold, and the closer you get to the AGA the more cosy it becomes; it attracts you to it, and attracts you to cook. So you see, cooking is only one aspect of the AGA – the other is living with and enjoying the heat.”

Paule and Peggy work hard to share this message through innovative marketing initiatives in Belgium, from developing cocktails to match the colours of new AGA models for launch events; to collaborating with event organisers, charities, food associations and luxury car manufacturers; to organising competitions, ‘open door days’ and demonstrations by top chefs – Ken Hom being one such professional to have cooked up a storm on the showroom hotplates. The company has even opened restaurants that use only AGA cookers.

But current owners – many of whom belong to Alfa Belgium’s AGA fan club – already fully understand the reality of living with the AGA. “If you think we are fans, you should hear what some of them say about their cookers – it’s amazing!” says Peggy. “They talk about them like they are people – they even give names to their AGA cookers! One of our customers once called us and said, ‘Agate is ill, you have to come immediately!’

“Older people who are in their 80s or 90s and have to move into retirement homes say, ‘What will I do? I can’t take my AGA with me!’

because it is the most important thing to them, and really is a part of their lives. And that is so difficult to explain to people – the AGA feeling; the AGA attitude; the AGA life.”

MORE THAN A COOKER

As with the development and sale of any product, it is essential to keep it relevant to the audience – and in the case of AGA, each new generation. The evolution of the AGA cooker has made it accessible to the 21st century owner, as well as many more people who would not previously have considered owning one. Indoor and under-floor ventilation, for example, have removed the need for a chimney and allowed owners to place the cooker within an island in a modern kitchen; whilst the Total Control and Dual Control models have reduced fuel consumption dramatically, as the ovens and hotplates can be operated independently to suit the owner’s lifestyle.

“The Dual Control and Total Control models are proving enormously popular,” Peggy affirms. “We launched Dual Control

here in October 2013, and by the start of the New Year we had achieved one third of our annual sales already just on that product.

“An AGA is something you sell with a passion, and a gut instinct. Each one that we have sold through the years is an ambassador, because it’s so much more than a cooker.

“If you are an AGA person you will be crazy about it – you will always speak about your AGA, you will always cook with your AGA, and there will be nothing better than an AGA, because it’s your baby.” ❖

“Cooking is only one aspect of the AGA – the other is living with and enjoying the heat”