


“I’ve Never Looked Back”

Gardener extraordinaire Costa Georgiadis explains his beard, and recalls the trip of a lifetime – but don’t touch his grandad’s secateurs.

by **Anastasia Safioleas** *Contributing Editor*

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Sixteen-year-old Costa was little. I was never the biggest tree in the forest! But by that stage I was shaving. It was something I never really enjoyed, which is why I ended up growing a beard. That’s the start and finish of it. I get asked a lot of questions about why I have the beard; it gets very existential. I just don’t like wasting time having to shave.

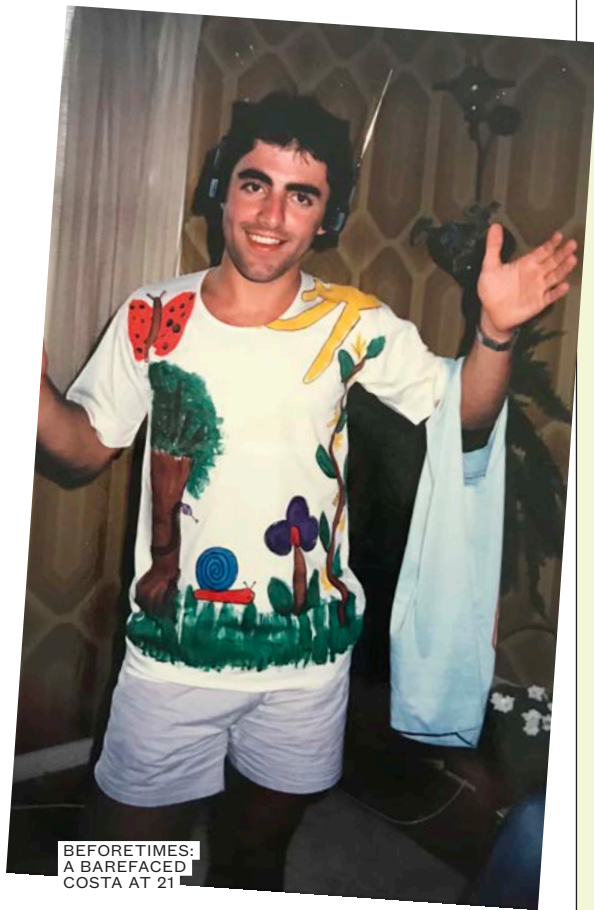
At 16 I had also just come back from the trip of a lifetime to Greece, that my mum and dad and yiayia had insisted on. I went with other Australian-Greek students and the Greek archdiocese. I came home after that trip and there was a shift in my confidence. I no longer felt the subtle stings of being Greek and being a wog. It shifted after that. I suddenly realised I was more worldly than those people who were bullying me. It was one of those moments

when I realised how thankful I am that my parents made me learn Greek. It wasn’t that I was embarrassed or not proud of it but when someone has one over you, you never know when they will drop that card. And that’s the uneven playing field of racism. I was able to stand up and say, “Oh, is that all you’ve got?” And I’ve never looked back.

I was wide-eyed, and I loved my friends. I was starting to be a bit more opinionated about things. But I was lucky that I had parents and sisters who were incredibly supportive and weren’t afraid to chop you down and make you accountable, much to my frustration – I thought I had a handle on the world. My friends were a good supportive group. I still have those friends and I value them as my most precious thing. You could take everything else, except for my grandfather’s secateurs. If you take those, I won’t be happy, and I’ll track you down.



PHOTO BY WILL HORNER: WILLHORNERPHOTO.COM.AU



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I used to play touch footy every weekend. We played rain, hail or shine. In fact, it was even better if it was raining. And I used to referee. I began to referee rugby at around 14 or 15. That was another great leveller because you have to communicate under emotionally inflamed circumstances. People step across the line and as a referee you have to de-escalate situations and manage the way people behave. Often, I had to manage adults as well. At the time I was also an abseiling instructor. When you have to instruct a teacher who's shaking as you push them off the fourth-floor verandah of a building, they have to trust you. These had an impact on my demeanour and my interaction with people. I've probably always been like a referee; you don't throw fuel on a fire. You calm things down and listen. It taught me a lot.

It wasn't that I wasn't interested [in girls], but I was always busy. I was captain of the cricket team, I refereed rugby, I played sport on the weekend. I'd ride my bicycle, go body surfing. I was really active. I always have been. I might've had a crush or two here and there. There might have been a little fling at a school dance...

Dad was a stickler for detail so if you were going to do something, you had to do it properly. That requires discipline and the capacity to not take a shortcut. As a 16-year-old it would drive me crazy because sometimes I just wanted to get something done and move on. Probably one of the most disciplined things – the Mr Miyagi moment – that Dad used to make us do was vacuum the swimming pool. You couldn't go fast because if you did it stirred up all the dirt. By the time you got to the end of the pool, all that dirt had settled and you had to go back and do it again. It was very zen. Dad would come and have a look and if you'd done it well, he'd be like "Okay, you're free to do what you want." Dad did things well and with a lot of care. As much as it used to drive me crazy, I'm exactly the same now.

Mum's lesson to me was about holding space for the people that matter. Mum did this incredibly well. She never missed a birthday or a name day or when someone had a baby or graduated or bought their first house or became the singer in a musical or whatever. I even got a cake once that she sent to Prague. When I got to the *poste restante*, which was how it was back then, there was a box with a cake in it. It had a bit of mould, but we cut it off and put a candle on it, she had supplied that too, and my friends sang 'Happy Birthday'. She listened really carefully. If you listen to people, then you're truly connected to them and what matters. That taught me to be present for the moments that matter.

The most valuable thing that my family gave me and my most precious asset is certainty. My parents provided certainty. And my grandparents were that same metronome of certainty. When you went over, the first thing they would say is "you've got to have something to eat". And I knew Papou would always be out in the garden.

The biggest surprise in my life is learning that predictability doesn't bring happiness, and that uncertainty and failure build the space for content. One of my biggest successes was when I failed the third year of my landscape architecture course at uni. That clipped my wings, just when I felt on top of the world. But it changed my outlook. It sent me on the path that I am on now in terms of understanding environment and sustainability. It really lit the fuse that then took flame and has been going ever since. I was going to do a paper on outdoor dining, but I turned it around

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COSTA'S SPRING-PLANTING GUIDE

Early spring is a great time of year to enjoy nature bursting forth through new buds, new leaves and, of course, a variety of new flowers. Take a walk around your area and observe what is flowering in your local gardens and parks. Take note of the things you like. Watch out for birds and insects, such as native bees, and see which ones you can identify. Is wildlife slowly becoming more active? The weather can also be a bit unpredictable at this time year, with cool days followed by hot days or frost or even hailstorms. Getting to know the weather makes you better prepared and connected with what is happening on the ground.

TROPICS
basil, carrot, eggplant, sweet corn

SUBTROPICS
beetroot, coriander, lettuce, tomato

TEMPERATE ZONE
broccoli, celery, lettuce, mint

**HERE ARE THE BEST THINGS
TO PLANT RIGHT NOW ACCORDING
TO WHERE YOU LIVE**

COOL ZONE
carrot, chives, onion, potatoes

ARID ZONE
beans, cabbage, dill, spring onion



and did a thesis about green cities of the future: ecology, sustainability, awareness and responsibility for the enrichment of human settlements. That's *everything* that I'm involved with today. And that came about because I failed.

One of the happiest moments of my life was seeing my sisters have their children; that was pretty amazing. And when I set off on my world trip. I was 25. I travelled with friends for nine months and then found work in Vienna in Austria. Just being able to jump on a train and go to Prague or Budapest or go hiking in the hills. Some of my happiest moments were hiking in the Austrian Alps and looking out over the sunset and thinking *Wow, this is another world*. I was living what I had wished for: to travel and see places and meet people. That trip was probably one of my happiest moments.

Today I would tell 16-year-old Costa don't be hard on yourself. Acknowledge the things you do and the things you achieve. And if you set goals, make sure you bring

everyone with you because it will be all the more fulfilling when you're on the top of the sand dune, the top of the mountain, the edge of lake... It will be all the more amazing if you're there with people. And make sure you do things bit by bit. Massive deep shifts will polarise and create problems and not necessarily achieve what you want to achieve.

The more you listen and really engage, then the more you get back. I'd also tell my younger self to make sure you record the facts and the figures and the stories that matter around those who are precious and whose time may be limited. And don't be afraid of adapting and shifting your purpose as it adapts and shifts with your experiences and your life. Make an effort to connect with our country. If I had the time again, I would have gotten into the community and onto country earlier. Now it's what I do a lot of and I'm fortunate, but back then it wasn't the same. Now there's opportunities to connect with the true caretakers of the land. ■

COSTA HOSTS *GARDENING AUSTRALIA*, FRIDAYS AT 7.30PM ON ABC TV AND ABC IVIEW. HIS NEW BOOK, *COSTA'S WORLD* (ABC BOOKS) WILL BE AVAILABLE IN ALL GOOD BOOKSTORES AND ONLINE FROM 13 OCTOBER – AND PRE-ORDER VIA BOOKTOPIA.