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NEWS

Growth of native pepper industry

BY ISABEL BIRD

NOT too many Tasmanians are familiar with the mountain pepper berry.

Talk to growers and harvesters and they will tell you that this culinary pepper, with its unique, spice tastes and vibrant colour is relatively unknown, rarely tasted by locals let alone the rest of Australia.

Despite this, a fledgling yet busy industry devoted to the *Tasmanian lanceolata* quietly survives.

It is made up of individuals who work in a specially Tasmanian niche space.

The list of foods in which the berry currently appears is growing, and includes artisan cheeses, health tonics, breads, gins and infused oils. In restaurant and home-cooked kitchens producing classic and unique meals, such as pepper sauces for steaks or salt and pepper squid, and even in desserts.

While an Australian market for the pepper berry exists, growers are looking further afield to fill international markets, where some growers are already unable to keep up with European demand.

They also eye off untapped markets in Asia or South America, where hot spices are already accepted in their cuisines.

For now Bronzewing Farm owner Andrew Rath,



Freshly picked native pepper berries.

of Underwood, is banking on the popularity of the berry in Europe.

He has two landowners, in Scottsdale and Ulverston, lined up to grow his Bronzewing native pepper berry cultivar, with a contract to sell the berries back to him.

"The people that come to visit will be Germans, Austrians or Northern Italians, they already know all about the Tasmanian berry, and that is more than the people in Australia do," Mr Rath said.

"Germany... is the biggest individual market. The problem is that we can't supply them enough. We sell out every year and the existing market will take everything we have into the future."

Mr Rath said they were trying to encourage other farmers to start growing the plant in a move to make *Tasmanian lanceolata* a legitimate agricultural crop.



When the couple planted out their farm in 2011 they realised that a reliable and consistent supply of pepper berry was needed. Up to 95 per cent of the entire supply of Tasmanian Mountain Pepper is wild harvested, but Mr Rath said this "bush crop" was extremely variable from one season to the next, and the spice levels were inconsistent.

This season, for instance, is a bad year for the wild pepper berry.

"The bush crop fails probably two years in every five and what that means is you don't have a consistent supply. We sell to gin manufac-



GROWTH: Bronzewing native pepper berry farmer Andrew Rath is planning to fill European demand for the pepper new growers. Pictures: Paul Scambler

turers on the mainland and if such manufacturers can't get [the berries] one year, then they haven't got a product. Consistency is our number one priority."

Farming berries is important in terms of the industry's expansion but the wild harvest remains the main source of current supply.

For North West Coaster Marie McDonald, who owns Pepperberry Hills, it was important to utilise the natural berry rather than see it go to waste. She accidentally found the native trees on farm.

"We found about 50 of them, some are ten foot high.

“

We eat it every night in our house. It goes with almost everything.

Marie McDonald, Pepperberry Hills owner

It could take days just to pick one tree, which can sometimes be laden with them."

Mrs McDonald said she eventually bought a commercial dryer, selling whole and powdered pepper berries.

She said 15 kilograms of fresh berries will produce about five kilograms of the dried product.

“

We eat it every night in our house. It goes with almost everything.

Marie McDonald, Pepperberry Hills owner

Inquiries have come from as far as the US, with one prospective buyer looking to buy 20 kilograms, and she also supplies berries to North West producer Tasmanian Tonic Company.

For her, the pepper berry is a household spice staple.

"We eat it every night in our house, and sometimes breakfast. It is beautiful,

and goes with almost everything."

Wild Pepper Isle, run by Chris Chapman and Corinne Ooms, source their wild berries from more than ten private landowners, but are also propagating 3000 cuttings with plans to develop an orchard.

Mr Chapman said it takes about five years for a success-



Queensland fruit fly.

FRUIT FLY FREE STATUS CRITICAL

Tasmania's best defence against another incursion of Queensland fruit fly is simple - its cooler weather.

As winter approaches and apple producers plough through their season, the peak body for fruit growers has urged the importance of the state retaining its fruit fly free status, amidst the uncertainty around exports.

"The viability and growth of our fruit sector rely on maintaining our biosecurity and pest free area status and growers, the public and the government have a vital role to play," Fruit Growers Tasmania chief executive Peter Cornish said. An incursion of Queensland Fruit Fly in 2018 threatened to close markets for fruit growers and their exports and triggered a large scale response by government departments DPIWE and Biosecurity Tasmania.

A single male fruit fly found in Launceston in February did not count as an outbreak and since then there have been no new detections of the fly, Tasmanian Agriculture Minister Guy Barnett recently reaffirmed Tasmania was still fruit fly free since that detection.

There are more than 1000 permanent fruit fly traps placed around Tasmania. The traps are checked weekly during a high-risk period from October to March and then fortnightly through the cooler months. As Tasmania has entered those cooler months, the risk for fruit fly incursions becomes less likely, as fruit fly can't survive in those temperatures.

"It has a great flavour which adds depth to food but more than that, people are interested because it is the only native food that comes from the Tasmanian native forest. As a commercial, sellable product, it is 'lassis' own."

Covid-19: The Other Side plan

A NEW group The Other Side has formed to examine and discuss the challenges and opportunities that may arise post-Covid-19 for the horticultural industry.

Tasmanian Fruit & Vegetable Export Facilitation Group facilitator Ian Locke said more than 65 members met to identify actions that can be taken by horticultural producers as they seek to re-enter export markets.

He said the group looked at possible automation in the field and factory to help workplaces comply with safety and social distancing requirements.

"We are working on the availability of labour and workforce for the coming season, we might not have the workforce so some automation may be needed to cover the shortfall."

Digitalisation opportunities in export markets, the new need for single use packaging, and freight logistics were also discussed.

"Before Covid-19 half the air freight was carried in the bellies of passenger aircraft which might not exist anymore... so we have to determine the best way to get key agricultural products out by air," he said.

"We also have to give thought to affordable packaging solutions. Export products have traditionally used non-retail packaging but a lot of people are now looking for single use packaging."

The aim of the group was to remove economic uncertainty by forward planning.

"Uncertainty is toxic for economic recovery, so the more we can reduce uncertainty the better it is so we are stress-testing ideas, we are trying to re-imagine the future because we know that it is going to be different."

- ISABEL BIRD

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