

Green light for tomato



Just five years ago Marilyn Lanyon's farm was facing a disastrous future, but with some inspired lateral thinking, she was able to convert a problem into an opportunity. Senior writer, **Nicola Card**, explains Marilyn's recipe for success.

HERE'S THE QUESTION: what could Danish royalty, London's epicurean shoppers and a Victorian farm worker possibly have in common? The answer is the simple, humble green tomato. Guests at the wedding banquet of Mary Donaldson and Prince Frederick were treated to Simply Tomato antipasto, and it can be bought in London's prestigious Knightsbridge precinct.

Which is good news for Marilyn Lanyon of Terralea Farms at Boort in northern Victoria, who developed the unique green tomato antipasto five years ago as a business survival mechanism.

Originally sheep and cereal farmers, Marilyn and her husband Ian bought the tomato, cereal, wheat and sheep farm in 1978 in partnership with Ian's brother Murray and his wife Betty. They established a good business growing tomatoes for processing companies.

Later Murray and Betty headed off for a new venture but Ian's son Damien became a business partner in 2000. Not long after, the outlook was looking decidedly grim when, in September 2001, they lost a major cannery contract.

It was Marilyn's never-say-die approach that saved the day. She had already taken interest in a sliced pickled green tomato recipe created by a local Italian friend and thought: 'why not try it?' Marilyn was no novice to food preparation having already produced and sold her own cookbook. And, of course, there was no shortage of green tomatoes.

Marilyn adapted the recipe the origins of which lay in thrifty Italians using end-of-season produce that would otherwise be turfed. Although she believed in the product's potential, the next step was gaining market approval. Taste-testing research took Marilyn and her antipasto to wineries, delis and coffee shops across northern Victoria and the response was consistently positive: people complimented her not just on ►

product

the taste but also the texture of the sliced tomatoes.

Thinking global not just local, Marilyn then went on a trip organised by Horticulture Australia to Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia to gauge overseas interest. "There we were, a group of ten Australian farming women presenting to Asian supermarket CEOs. It was an eye-opener for us, to say the least."

And Marilyn cannot recommend Austrade's New Exporter Program more highly. She even says the Danish caterer, who emailed her in February 2004 with the royal banquet order, had hit upon the product at an Austrade export conference.

During her travels here and overseas Marilyn was able to confirm that there are only two others in the world making the antipasto, one in Sicily, the other in mainland Italy.

Positive vibes from all quarters of the globe provided Marilyn and Ian with the confidence they needed to build a factory, following strict government guidelines, that's "much like a large kitchen", complete with the all-essential electric slicer and a cryovac machine for vacuum packing.

There's a short window of opportunity to pick the green tomatoes: from the beginning of January to early March.

"Three days is all it takes to process the golf-ball sized tomatoes," Marilyn says, "The same day they are hand-picked they're sliced. We feed one tomato at a time into the machine making sure the slice is not too thin, so as to hold the 'crunchiness' of the tomato.

"The sliced tomatoes are then placed in brine preservative for two days. After that they receive a splash of extra virgin olive oil, along with garlic and oregano. No sugar, preservatives, flavours or colours are added, Simply Green Tomatoes are also gluten free."



All product is prepared by hand so it's a labour intensive process, but Marilyn's proud that all 22 employees are local.

The long-lasting vacuum packed products are kept cool in 100kg wheelie bins in underground storerooms.

Why vacuum packed? "It stands out on the shelf, is tamper proof, and the pack flat can be easily posted," Marilyn says, demonstrating once more her pragmatic approach to business.

Half a decade on and about 300 outlets in Australia are selling or serving the product, including organic produce stores, supermarkets, cafes, five-star hotels, casinos, even cruise liners. The export market which kick-started at the beginning of 2002 is substantial, a total of twenty countries including Hong Kong and Singapore, and right now there are more 'big rumbles' of interest across the US and UK.

Adding to the product's appeal is the distinctive and award-winning logo created by a Melbourne designer. Marilyn's brief back in 2001 was for "stunning packaging – we wanted a good presentation... and we got exactly what we wanted".

Lots of attention, too

Simply Tomatoes has picked up a swag of awards: last year the Vogue Entertaining and Travel Best New Product Award, and Gold medal in the Australian

Packaging Award for Exports. Marilyn was State Winner of the Victorian Rural Women's Award in 2004. There was also a bronze medal in the Australian Packaging Awards back in 2002. Proceeds from awards have enabled Marilyn to travel overseas in her quest for new markets.

But she says it's not all been beer and skittles, their 970 hectare irrigation farm has endured several years of drought, affecting their cereal, wheat and red tomato crops. They have watched with heartache as crops have withered, been strangled by weeds, devoured by disease or consumed by a plague of grasshoppers.

Weathering such adversity makes farmers among the most resilient in the community, and Marilyn has always maintained a positive spirit by taking the farm in new 'value adding' directions. These days, Terralea Farms is very much part of the tourist trail. Each week brings a new bus load of tourists to the processing plant, and visitors enjoy a gourmet picnic complete with raspberry swirl ice-cream featuring... you guessed it, green tomatoes.

But now looking to the future and in common with the product's origins, Marilyn wants to preserve as much waste as possible and is trialing an antipasto processing byproduct for a tasty vinegaretté salad dressing. Other plans include increased mechanisation to reduce the labour intensive processes. ●