



Crisp lettuce proves a stayer for Don

ALMOST 40 YEARS GROWING VEGETABLES HAS TAUGHT SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DON RUGGIERO THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING A STRONG BRAND, WRITES ANDREW MACDONALD.

If you've bought or eaten a lettuce in South Australia or the Northern Territory in the past decade, there's a pretty good chance it's been one of Don Ruggiero's. For the past 38 years, the grower from Murray Bridge, about 75km

southeast of Adelaide, has followed in the footsteps of his parents and worked the land where he grew up. Initially a smaller-scale grower of lettuce and onions, Don's Swanport Harvest business venture took a significant turn when he

embarked on a push to develop his very own 'value-added' product, about 14 years ago.

The resulting Staycrisp-labelled lettuce, which has incorporated packing, branding, distribution and marketing initiatives, has helped transform

Don's business in to one of the largest, if not the largest, producer of the commodity in his home state. Up to six million head of iceberg and 800,000 head of cos, along with about 1000 tonnes of broccoli and smaller amounts of cauliflower,

are now produced by his operations each year.

Undoubtedly, the location of Don's primary property on the banks of the Murray River provides natural advantages as one of the few places in Australia where lettuce can be grown year-round. Incorporating growing sites located in different climactic zones has also helped ensure consistency.

However, to attribute the operation's success solely to geographic good fortune would be to undersell the benefits of developing the Staycrisp brand.

"We developed our own brand about 14 years ago with iceberg lettuce, called Staycrisp, so that's probably our biggest claim to fame," says Don. "Our brand here in South Australia and the Northern Territory is very well known in a lot of shops, so in a lot of shops probably around 40 per cent of iceberg sales is our brand."

"These days we deal with most of the chains. So you're looking at Woolies, Foodland, IGA and also some of the smaller food and veg shops."

Building the brand

Far from simply slapping a sticker on a lettuce, the development of the Staycrisp brand has required significant investment and a series of tweaks along several stages of the harvesting, production and distribution process.

Before ending up on the shelf, the lettuces are cut firm and then packed in to modified-atmosphere packaging in the

field. They are then snap-cooled within an hour of harvest.

This rapid vacuum cooling process has helped improve the longevity of the product, to the point where Don says shelf life can extend beyond 14 days.

By offering to deliver his produce within 24 hours of harvest, Don has also managed to market his brand as an attractively-packaged premium product which also cuts down on in-store labour costs.

Challenges and their solutions

Despite the successful development of the Staycrisp brand, ongoing prosperity isn't assured as the business grapples with the same pressures faced by many in the vegetable industry. Don says increasing overheads from inputs such as power and water, as well as labour costs and diminishing returns are putting

pressure on profit margins.

"We're the largest lettuce growers in the state of South Australia and I suppose we're finding times right now pretty tough, compared to how they were five to eight years ago in terms of profit bottom lines," he says.

"The overheads have caught up with everybody at the moment and I know everybody is in the same boat, but it has been testing for us. Labour is a pretty big one, as it is for everybody."

Despite the trying business environment, Don isn't ready to concede quite yet. Currently in the early stages of developing a line of cauliflower, using a similar approach applied to the lettuce brand, the veteran grower says he is hopeful the new initiative will take off. In the face of testing times, he insists the future of the industry lies in the successful development of 'value-added' products.

"Really I think it's almost the only way forward and if you can't do that, you're going to struggle," he says. "These days it's not always about the product anymore – a lot of it comes down to marketing and brands, and all the rest."

"The hardest thing when you are value-adding, or doing something different is that sometimes it can be hard to convince the people between yourself and getting your product to consumers that it is a great product. So it isn't always an easy road and you can have a great concept and a great product but that doesn't necessarily mean you are going to get it off the ground."

"It can be hard to find people to share your vision, but you just have to back yourself and keep trying. We also are on the verge of developing a value-added cauliflower, similar to what we did with lettuce, so we'll have to see how we go with that."



Photographs by Andrew Beveridge.

