



PHOTOGRAPHY THESE PAGES: GREENGROVE ORGANICS

RIPE FOR THE PICKING

Once a fringe dweller, organic produce is now decidedly mainstream and demand is outstripping supply. Jane Sandilands

Up in Junee, on the Murrumbidgee River halfway between Sydney and Melbourne, Neil Druce of Greengrove Organics describes the brief history of organic produce in terms of his own family.

His father, Alan, became concerned about pollution in the food chain and “went organic” on the family farm in 1962. Back then he was labelled a lunatic. Then in the ‘70s, Druce says, they called his father a fanatic. In the ‘80s he had what was referred to as “an unusual fringe idea” and by the ‘90s, he was seen as “cutting edge”. Now, as a 21st century man, Druce senior is recognised as a guru.

Built in the mid-1930s, the Junee Flour Mill once employed 25 workers, operated around the clock and produced 5.6 million bushels of flour each year. A modern stone mill has now been installed in the old mill, converting grain grown on the Druce family's 1100ha (2,700 acre) farm 'Green Grove', into flour for use in bread and bread mixes. The organic flour is sold to a handful of bakeries which follow the European tradition, wanting good quality, chemical-free flour.

Back in the 1960s, there was little research and no financial premium for growing organic produce. These days, Green Grove has an association with the Australian National University as part of a \$1.4 million research project that constantly monitors and compares the property with conventional farming output. In fact, in 1998, Green Grove was presented at the 7th International Conference of Ecology in Florence as a significant organic test site.

A few years ago, in an effort to extend its product range, Greengrove Organics, which holds level 'A' Organic Certification through the Biological Farmers Association of Australia (BFA), started making licorice from its flour – with some varieties coated with a delicious, organic Belgian chocolate.

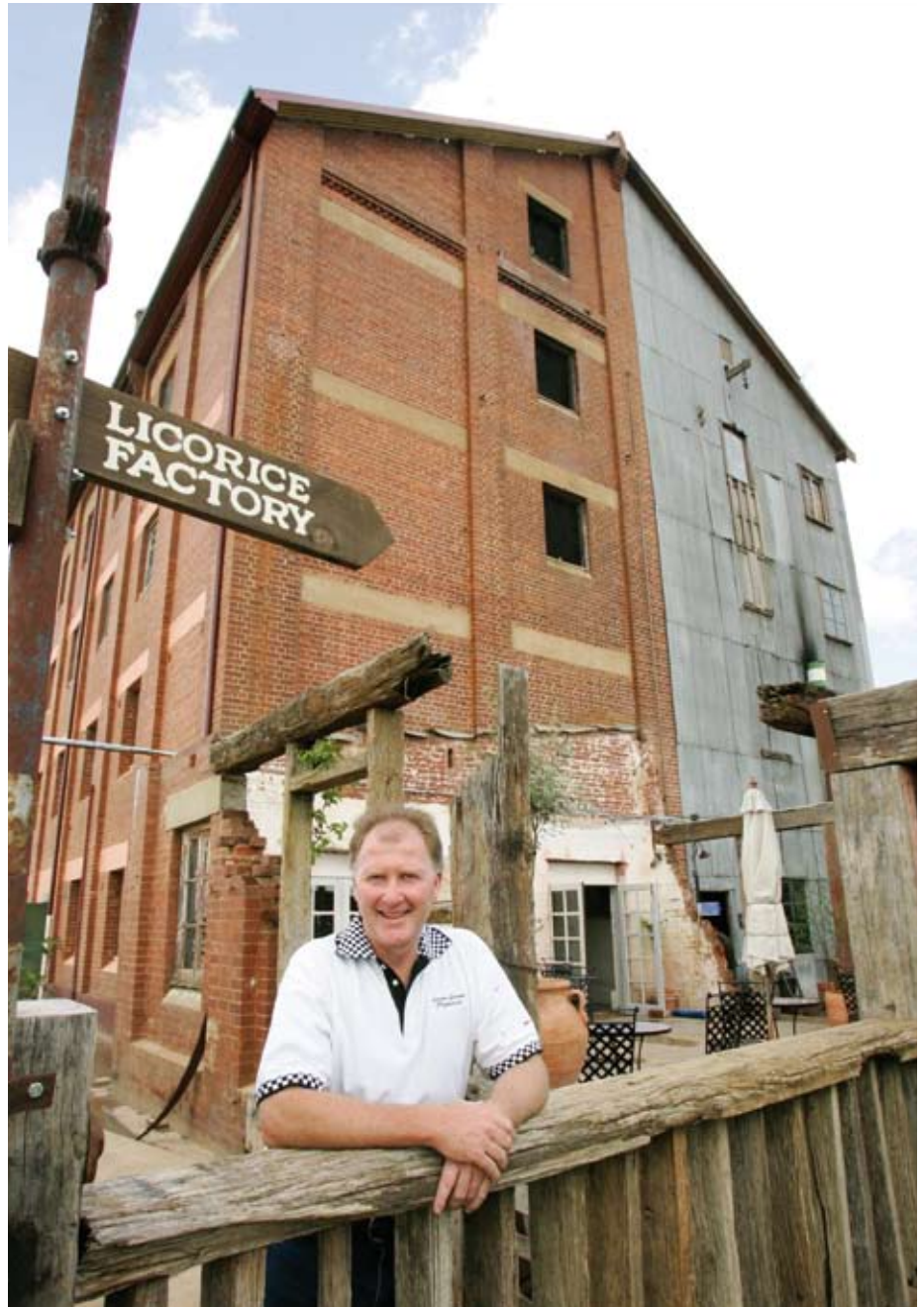
From a slow start, a visit to what is now known

“A recent Greengrove Organics survey showed that 3% of their visitors came because they saw an advertisement, 18% because of signage and 48% because of word of mouth.”

as the Junee Licorice and Chocolate Factory is boosting visitor numbers to Junee, as well as spreading the message of just how good organic products can taste.

Then in 2002, Greengrove Organics' achievements were awarded the Riverina Gold Plate Award for innovative products, followed by two awards in 2004: one for the Most Educational Tourist Attraction in Inland NSW in the Heritage and Cultural area and the other for the Best Tourist Attraction in New South Wales.

In 2005, Neil Druce says, Junee Licorice and Chocolate Factory had a breakthrough. “At the Organic Expo in Sydney, people came through with a level of understanding great enough to convince us that many people are thinking that organic is the way to eat, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It's come right away from the fringe, and instead of 0.5% of the



Greengrove Organics' Neil Druce at the company's Junee licorice and chocolate factory.

population showing interest, it's more like 50%.”

Greengrove Organics now sells into every state in Australia, although there still appears to be resistance to the products in farming areas. The main benefit to be gained from more sales, Druce says, is that prices will fall, although organic processes will always be more expensive.

Now, visitors to the Factory average 200 a day, they enjoy it, they buy the product where they see it made, and because “it's a shotgun spread of people across Australia, they spread the word”, Druce says.

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advertisement, 18% because of signage and 48% because of word of mouth. When they started tours in 2001, it was a case of “look out the window, see a car, wash your face and hands and say hello”. Today, there is a dedicated tour staff of 15 and an interesting and entertaining tour because “people need to have fun”.

Druce says that his father first read about the possibilities of organic farming in the 1950s, when the chemicals and defoliants used in the Second World War were being used in agriculture to help take the hard work out of farming.

“He knew then it couldn't be good for the soil,

and it's not about how much you can produce. It's about being ethical and knowing that what you're producing is good."

Out in the far west of New South Wales at Broken Hill, there were three main drivers in Garry Hannigan's move from growing wool to an operation where 80% of his stock is in meat sheep.

One was the fluctuating and uncertain wool market followed by the collapse of the live sheep trade to the Middle East, which had been a major strand for the business.

The other was looking closely at how best to use the unspoiled environment of his 48,582ha (120,000 acre) farm 'Churinga', which is now certified through BFA.

One of the advantages of this vast semi-arid region of New South Wales is that there is virtually no introduced vegetation, with the stock grazing on native grasses, herbage, bluebush and saltbush.

Hannigan has now conservatively stocked his property with 80% meat sheep and 20% merinos. With this conservative stocking of one sheep to

"It's come right away from the fringe, and instead of 0.5% of the population showing interest, it's more like 50%."

8ha (20 acres) across 90% of the property, a diverse range of native vegetation is maintained, enhancing the unique flavour of the lamb produced in the region. And the stocking rate is also better for the environment and for surviving droughts.

One of the economic benefits for Hannigan is that the African breeds of meat sheep are very efficient growers of meat, are suited to the harsh environment and have hair rather than wool and so do not require shearing, thus freeing up valuable time.

Another key benefit of going organic is that he can combine his passion for efficient rangelands production and for the environment, something that was recognised when he received the 'NSW Farmer of the Year Award' in 2004.

Hannigan is also one of 10 farmers involved

in a pilot project under a joint state and federal government initiative, to manage a 4,050ha (10,000 acre) conservation area to keep it stock-free and return the country to its original condition.

It took Garry Hannigan two years to become fully accredited as an organic farmer. An annual audit system is involved, but one of the advantages of this, he says, is that keeping accurate records and combining these with overall property management means that product can be traced right back to the paddock of origin.

The rewards can be measured in terms of better prices and an income that is evenly spread throughout the year. And demand is growing.

Rangelands Organic, the brand under which 'Churinga' produce is marketed, is sold in Sydney and the market is building by a staggering 30% each



Visitors to Greengrove Organic's factory watch licorice being made during a guided tour.



Built in 1934, the old Junee Flour Mill has been restored and a modern day stone mill installed, converting grain grown on the Green Grove farm into product for inclusion in organic confectionery, flour and bread mixes.

year. And in absolutely ideal timing, Hannigan has just won a Nuffield Scholarship to study organic lamb marketing in the UK, USA, Canada, China, Asia and Europe.

While Gary Hannigan changed an existing operation to go down the organic path, Mark and Ruth Gallagher at Kendall in the Mid North Coast

region of New South Wales bought a property in 1992, which had previously run cattle, to turn it into a biodynamic citrus operation.

It took two years for them to gain organic certification with BFA, a task made easier, Gallagher says, by the fact that the property had never been cropped.



PHOTOGRAPHY: PREM SAMIRA

Jo O'Connor, along with husband Anthony, sells organic fruit and vegetables to an increasingly receptive market at Bermagui.

He had worked as a journalist in Sydney and his wife was a TAFE manager, so with relatively portable professions, they decided to move and pursue their joint interests: growing citrus, experimenting with growing Asian vegetables and herbs, and seizing the opportunity to put an ideological commitment into practice by growing organic produce.

With a small farm of 51ha (126 acres) and 1400 citrus trees, they reasoned there needs to be a high premium value for what you sell. Gallagher says the answer is either 'exotic, or premium quality, or both'.

With the farm certified biodynamic by BFA in 1997, they grow kaffir limes, blood oranges and

“It’s all to do with opening doors and getting people to think more about their food and where it comes from, she says.”

pummelos (which Gallagher describes as a large citrus fruit, “sometimes bigger than a football”, with an interesting flavour, which is used in salads and other Asian dishes). In between the trees, they grow lemongrass, chillies, galangal and turmeric, which gives product diversity and breaks up the monoculture.

Although it is recognised by most farmers that running a farm is a hard way to earn a living, Mark Gallagher says it’s “a wonderful way to live”. And with a biodynamic farm, he says, part of the pleasure is “producing a worthwhile product and knowing on the broader scale that we’re doing something good.”

To add value to their produce, they turn their blood oranges and kaffir limes into certified organic marmalades in an on-farm commercial kitchen. They market these under the Harmony Farm Organics label through their website and at the monthly Sydney Morning Herald Good Living Growers’ Markets in Sydney.

They take a range of produce to market,



Organic sheep farmer, Garry Hannigan, at Churinga Station near Broken Hill.

including Asian herbs, and relish the “fantastic feedback” from customers who buy organic and biodynamic produce for a range of reasons. “Some do it because it’s healthier, some because it’s a new ingredient that chefs are using, and others couldn’t care less but it tastes good,” Mark Gallagher says.

And it’s the taste plus the ‘good for you’ factor that most often draws consumers to organic produce. At Penny’s Produce, an organic and biodynamic supermarket in Traralgon in Victoria’s East Gippsland, staffmember Shantel Morsink says this is a change from two or three years ago, when customers were drawn to organic produce because they saw cleaner, chemical-free food as a healthier option.

“A lot of people had issues with the way, for example, some meat was grown and processed, and so they chose to go down the path of organic produce.” Now, she says, the customer mix at Penny’s Produce is “much more mainstream”. Because of this, she finds she often needs to explain the premium on organic foods.

“When people ask why the vegetables are more expensive, I explain how they are produced and how time consuming it is because there is obviously a lot more labour involved if you can’t get a tractor and spray the whole crop.” Invariably, she says, they are happy to make the purchase.

The store is well known as far away as Melbourne, and in addition to its complement of 50-plus fruits and vegetables, it carries more than 500 lines of organic and biodynamic groceries from baby food to cereals, meat, wines and beers.

Another factor in increasing sales is that Penny’s Produce sources Australian grown and manufactured products, and this is appreciated by customers, who often mention they like to support a local industry.

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Local industry of the micro variety is being supported at Bermagui Fruit and Vegetables, on the New South Wales far south coast. Here, Jo and Anthony O’Connor have made household words of clean, green, home-grown and organic.

Owning the business for just over two years, Jo O’Connor worked for the previous owners two days a week for six months and got a sense of what was possible. Always “a bit of a vegie head” and with a hothouse in their home garden, Jo says that consumers are at first responsive and then keen to buy when they see that healthier options are available.

Although the local Bermagui growers are not certified organic and the quantities they grow are small, none of them has used chemicals in the last 20 to 25 years. Jo lets it be known that she will buy-in two kilos or 50 kilos and “a little bit of this and that”. The rewards are there for the shoppers of Bermagui, with snap-fresh beans, luscious tomatoes as they used to be and a variety of herbs that would put many a city fruiterer to shame.

And there are some unexpected side benefits as well. “A lot of what happens here is about developing relationships, building community spirit and changing the way people think about fresh food,” Jo says.

“For example, people are thinking about eating seasonally again. They look at the broccoli and it’s not marvellous and they’re right. But it’s January, and it will be wonderful soon in winter.” As well as sourcing local home-grown produce, Jo orders in organic fruit and vegetables from Sydney, and the proof that people care about what they’re eating is in the number of new customers she gets each week – along with her regulars.

“It’s all to do with opening doors and getting

people to think more about their food and where it comes from”, she says. ■

WHAT’S ORGANIC ANYWAY?

Organic farming does not involve the use of synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides or other agricultural chemicals. Instead, organic farmers work with nature to improve the fertility of the soil.

Certified organic is a more sophisticated process than simply avoiding chemical fertilisers and sprays. It is legally defined, and is regulated by independent third party certification agencies which require careful record-keeping and adherence to strict guidelines.

Biodynamic farming involves a specific system of organic agriculture. It builds fertility through on-farm-produced manures, composts, balanced crop rotations and the use of biodynamic preparations which activate soil and plants. ■

For more information about the organic farms mentioned in this story, go to www.greengroveorganics.com, www.harmonyfarm.com.au, www.pennysproduce.com.au and www.rangelandsorganic.com.au



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