



Taste 'n See



A fruitful, forty-year friendship

Brian Stothart and Merv Shiffke have been good family friends for forty years – and both have been involved in strawberries for just as long.

Nearly 20 years ago they moved together to neighbouring properties on Stern Road in Bellmere, near Caboolture 50 kilometres to the north of Brisbane.

“We got together a long time ago,” says Merv.

“And to work together as long as we have, the relationship must be good – we work together well... it's easy.”

During that time they've seen plenty of changes.

“So much has changed during the years,” says Brian.

“Particularly in the number of varieties and how to learn and grow these new varieties.”

Brian has also observed the changes and innovations in packaging as well as the tools of the trade, including picking trolleys and irrigation.

“There was a time when it was all overhead irrigation, but we've since used a number of methods, notably trickle irrigation.”

Despite the introduction of new technologies, both Brian and Merv agree that one thing hasn't changed, that no one year is the same as the other – and that strawberries remain a highly labour intensive business.

At peak season, Brian says he'd have about 135 people working on his property – Merv, a few more, “probably around 160.”

Some things never change A passion to grow

The other thing that hasn't changed for Brian or Merv is perhaps one of the most important.

“That is a passion to grow a good eating strawberry,” says Brian.

“It's the passion and the will to do the best you can,” adds Merv.

“Consumers have always wanted a good, sweet strawberry,” says Merv. “And that hasn't changed, nor is it likely to change.”

If all the years in the trade has taught Merv anything it's what the consumer wants.

“We're focusing on the consumer when we grow, more so than Coles” says Merv. “Although this is a focus we both share.”

“I know what I expect as a consumer,” says Merv.

“I'm very much a consumer-based grower, not an agent-based grower – and that's why we've done so well at Coles, because it's all about the consumer for them also.”

Demanding the best quality Chasing the best strawberries

“About eight or nine years ago, Coles chased us pretty hard,” says Merv.

“We trailed about 25 per cent of our crop in the first year with them and it worked well. Within two years that figure had bumped up to 75-to-80 per cent.”

Merv says that's when they started thinking about 100 per cent,” says Merv.

“There were many people advising us against it – not to put all our eggs in one basket .

“In the end we decided if we were to go ahead, it would require quite a commitment.

“...and Coles made that commitment – and that's pretty fantastic.”

Today, Taste 'n See provides Coles with approximately 350,000 trays of strawberries each year. *(continued page 2)*

AT A GLANCE

2.1 A FRUITFUL FRIENDSHIP

Brian Stothart and Merv Shiffke share a friendship, a business and a passion for growing a great strawberry.

2.2 ALL IN THE FAMILY

Strawberries are at the heart of the Stothart and Shiffke families. Both families work the farm year round, and thanks to the commitment of Coles, both families have a sound future to look forward to.

2.3 Q&A AND SOME STATS

How Coles day-to-day contact with Taste 'n See is helping them continue to produce a great tasting strawberry and some key stats that demonstrate the success of the business.



Brian Stothart cooks up a barbecue for the team at Taste 'n See

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

The Stothart and Shiffke families are both heavily involved in the running of Taste 'n See.

“Family is why I’m doing this,” says Merv.

“I’ve two sons and three daughters on the farm and thanks to Coles, they have a great future to look forward to.”

They help us maintain the farm and are learning the ropes as we go.

And Merv hopes both family’s relationship with the farm continues for a long time, and that includes a growing brood of six children, 15 grand children and one great-grandchild.

The Stothart and Shiffke families have been friends for forty years.

“The relationship we have with Coles has helped secure the future of our farm, and hopefully it will see the relationship between the families continue for another forty years.”

Demanding the best quality Chasing the best strawberries

“If we could produce 500,000, Coles would take them all.”

Driven by quality The best out of the shed

Taste 'n See has approximately 1.4 million plants growing across 50 acres.

But for Brian, it is all about the quality of what they produce, more than the quantity.

“We strive for high quality and we’ve never gone away from that,” says Brian.

“It doesn’t matter what you grow,” says Merv, “so long as what you grow is good.”

“If we can’t master it, we won’t grow it – even if there is money in it,” says Merv.

“We’re not going to sacrifice our consumer base and the confidence they have in us for a few quick dollars.

“It’s more than just our name – it’s our business.”

Brian shares these sentiments. “What comes out of the shed is the best we can do,” says Brian.

“Every strawberry we send to Coles is the best we can do.”

The benefit of experience 40 years of quality

“You learn a lot over 40 years,” says Merv. “Like anything, it comes down to knowing your product and what you grow.”

Merv believes that so long as they continue to apply the same dedication to their craft, consumers will continue to buy more and more strawberries.

“There’s a lot to get right in this game,” says Merv.

“For every variety of strawberry you need to know the right time to plant it, the right nutrition and making sure it is picked and packed correctly.”

“People buy strawberries with their eyes,” adds Brian.

“Strawberries are a soft fruit – if they’re mishandled at any stage of the process they can get bruised. Not only

does this affect the appearance of the fruit, it can reduce its shelf-life.”

Brian says a lot of time is dedicated to training their team the correct way to handle the fruit.

The result is a great looking strawberry with a great flavour.

“It’s all about flavour,” emphasises Brian.





Q&A

with Taste 'n See's Brian Stothart

Does your relationship with Coles help provide further insights into the needs of consumers?

Definitely... all the time.

We have day-to-day contact with Coles and they are constantly providing us with quality insight.

We share information on an ongoing basis.

How is Coles helping taste 'n See meet its business objectives?

Our business is all about quality and quality costs money and at the end of the day, you need to get paid for what you do.

We've a good relationship with Coles and they look after us.

We have a top quality product they want and importantly they see the value in that.

Does Coles commitment also help Taste 'n See continue to be at the forefront of new products?

Coles is certainly interested in helping us in this area.

They are often on the farm and are interested in the different varieties we're growing. Sometimes they might not be completely into a new variety we've got going, but then they'll come on the farm, taste it and be convinced.

We trial dozens and dozens of new varieties and are continually looking for a better strawberry.

One of the varieties we've got going is the Fortuna. It's early days, but we think it's the 'bees knees' in terms of flavour.

We do a lot of work with DPI on different varieties, looking at flavour, appearance and disease resistance, but usually in small quantities.

Once we decide to grow a variety at commercial numbers, Coles knows about it... in fact they'll come out and taste it as soon as they can.

On product types and innovation, how are you trying to provide Coles with a point of difference?

I think the biggest thing that provides a point of difference is our passion to produce to the best of our ability.

Quality in the field, quality in the shed and quality in the packing – the whole procedure is consistent and Coles know they're getting quality all the time.

TASTE 'N SEE 'N STATS...

20

The number of years ago the Stothart and Shiffke families moved to their home farms at Bellmere to start Taste 'n See.

295

The number of people employed by Taste 'n See during peak season.

350,000

The number of trays of strawberries Taste 'n See produces each year.

1,400,000

The number of plants across Taste 'n See's 50 acres of strawberries.

100

The percentage of Taste 'n See strawberries sold to Coles.

40

The number of years Brian and Merv have been friends growing strawberries together.