

Q&A

with MFC Senior Trader, Marcus Scott

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

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The communication is excellent.

We work very closely with them on specials and what times are best suited for our fruit. If we have a heavy week, they'll help us out with things such as more shelf space to promote (and sell) our fruit.

Coles also helps us with feedback from their consumers and suggestions to help us out with new product development.

How is Coles helping MFC with its overall business objectives?

Traditionally, MFC has always had an export focus, with approximately 85 per cent of our fruit sent offshore.

That's recently changed a bit, and Coles has played a crucial role in that philosophy.

Their importance in the domestic market, combined with the support they've provided us, has given us the confidence to renew our local focus – and it's something we look forward to continuing.

How important is Coles' commitment to running and co-ordinating a number of growers in different locations?

It's absolutely important.

In the past it was all a bit hit and miss – a bit one week, nothing the next and a lot the week after.

Now we have a long-term commitment and a number to work towards.

This provides us with the two things critical to the success of our company – consistency and growth.

A great example of the support Coles has provided is the program that allows us to spread our season in a light crop year (such as this season). This lengthens the season and reduces the need to import.

Does Coles commitment also help MFC continue to be at the forefront of new product varieties?

Yes it does.

Our growers are already proactive, but to be backed by a major supermarket like Coles provides the confidence for our growers to continue to invest in and trial new products.

As a result, we work with Coles quite closely during the process and their opinion is important as they are able to tap into consumer trends – something we hope to see over time with the Amour mandarin.

On varieties and innovation, are there any products other than Amour where you're looking to provide Coles with a point-of-difference?

We're constantly trialling new varieties – up to nine or ten each season.

Some of these won't be successful as they go head-to-head with the tried-and-true varieties, but there are a couple we're looking at that are early or late season varieties that also serve to extend the availability of Australian-grown fruit.

A variety that we're excited about is the M7, an early season navel that is looking very promising.





Building the relationship

Working closer with Coles

The Mildura Fruit Company (MFC) traces its history back more than 100 years to its origins as a Co-Op.

Over the last 7-8 years, Coles has played an important role in underpinning the success of MFC as it continues to grow and be a significant local employer.

“Initially we just supplied Coles with bits and pieces,” says Senior Trader Marcus Scott.

“But our relationship has continued to build over the years and we are now a volume-based supplier.”

As the relationship continues to grow, so does the collaboration.

Growing a better relationship

MFC prides itself on being a grower-orientated company.

“We have two service guys ensuring consistency in the fields,” says Marcus.

“They monitor the crops and help with forecasts and sizing – the more we can do to help them, the better it is for us.

“It also allows us to provide Coles with a consistent supply – and importantly, a consistent high quality.

One of the major benefits of Coles’ long-term commitment to MFC is that it allows both organisations to plan ahead, rather than operate on a week-to-week basis.

“Growing balanced crops of good sized fruit improves grower profitability,” says Marcus.

The single, most important factor governing market returns is fruit size, which is largely affected by crop load.

“Our field guys are in the orchards throughout November during the physiological fruit drop period to get an indication of the season’s crop.”

By using a 0.5m x 0.5m x 0.5m frame and counting all fruitlets inside, growers can get a good idea of crop load.

The earlier growers can identify a potential problem with size, the more opportunities a grower has to put into practice tools to achieve profitable yields.

This information is also passed onto Coles, allowing them to better plan and amend specifications if required.

“We now have seven years of historical data with Coles,” says Marcus.

“This provides us with a pretty accurate prediction about how the season will look.”



Marcus says MFC’s processes are as advanced as anywhere in the world and they are constantly travelling overseas to view the practices of other regions to ensure they stay ahead of the game.

“By sharing our intelligence with Coles and working closely with them, we both know exactly where we stand.

“And importantly, we both sell more fruit.”

NAVEL GAZING

3,500,000

The approximate number of cartons of fruit MFC delivers each year.

6

The number of quality control check-points from when the fruit arrives, to when it leaves the MFC factory.

120+

The number of Sunraysia citrus growers represented by MFC.

190

The number of people employed by MFC.

7,000,000

The number of dollars invested in major plant upgrades and shed expansion in recent years.

1

The number of supermarket chains that carry the popular and delicious Amour brand exclusive to the Sunraysia region.



Mildura Fruit Co.



AT A GLANCE

2.1 AMOUR MANDARINS A HIT AT COLES

The Amour range of mandarins, exclusive to Sunraysia and Coles, keep winter fruit sales ticking over.

2.2 WORLD'S BEST FOR COLES

MFC sends approximately 3.5 million cartons of fruit throughout the world each year, the very best of it goes straight to Coles supermarkets.

2.3 Q&A

How the relationship with Coles is benefitting MFC.

2.4 NAVAL GAZING

A look at the key numbers: 120+ growers; 3.5 million cartons of fruit a year; \$7 million in recent investment and six quality control check points to ensure only the very best fruit makes it to your shopping basket.

Coles customers en-amour-ed with Sunraysia mandarins

Coles customers have consistently been asking for a mandarin that is sweet, seedless, medium-to-large in size and easy to peel.

Thanks to the Mildura Fruit Company (MFC) they need ask no more.

The Amour mandarin, supplied exclusively to Coles by MFC ticks all the customers' boxes.

"It's a great quality mandarin," says MFC Senior Trader Marcus Scott.

"Exceptional quality."

Not only is the Amour mandarin a low-, or in many instances no-seeded mandarin, it also boasts a sweet, fleshy meat behind a deep-orange peel that is easy remove.

"It importantly also fills a gap in the season," says Marcus.

The Amour is a variety-in-a-variety, being a high-end, top-shelf derivative of the popular Afourer range of mandarins.

Locally-grown quality Simply the best

That Coles is the exclusive stockist of the Amour range further demonstrates the growing relationship between the two companies.

What once started as a "bits and pieces" relationship has over the course of 7-8 years developed into a commitment of such scope that it is skewing the philosophy of MFC to one that sees more and more of our best fruit stay in Australia.

"Traditionally, MFC has always had an export focus, with approximately 85 per cent of our fruit sent offshore," says Marcus.

"That's recently changed a bit, and Coles has played a crucial role in that philosophy.

"Their importance in the domestic

market, combined with the support they've provided us, has given us the confidence to renew our local focus – and it's something we look forward to continuing."

Driving innovation Extending support

The success of the Amour range of mandarins bodes well for other new varieties in MFC's pipeline that will extend the growing season.

"We've a product in production called the M7 early navel," says Marcus.

"It's a product of one of our growers, Chislett Developments, and is the world's earliest navel."

The M7 is described as having a rounder shape, preferred by retailers and consumers, together with a firmer fruit that gives it an extended harvest period, better handling and extended shelf life.

Coles will play a critical role in the success of the new variety, as with the Amour mandarin.

"When introducing a new product to market, there are two crucial factors," says Marcus.

"Consistent supply and consistent quality.

"These are the two things we can guarantee Coles, and they in-turn can guarantee their customers."

Marcus' comments are backed by the fact that only half of one per cent of MFC's product delivered to Coles doesn't make it to the shelves.

"The quality and reliability of our product has no doubt helped our relationship with Coles," says Marcus.

"We work hard to ensure that every tray we supply is of the same top quality as it was yesterday, today and will be tomorrow.



A - QUALITY ONLY THE BEST FOR COLES

Marcus Scott, Senior Trader at the Mildura Fruit Company, points out there are six quality control check points from when the fruit arrives at MFC to when it leaves for stores and markets.

“The first step is the fruit is categorised into A, B and C quality categories,” says Marcus.

“The A quality goes to Coles.”

Marcus says the MFC team is proud to pack for Coles, and their association with *MasterChef* and growing reputation for quality fresh food further enhances this pride.

A world leader in citrus Coles gets world's best

Mildura Fruit Company (MFC) is one of Australia's leading citrus packers and exporters, representing more than 120 growers throughout the Sunraysia region.

From its large packing-house in Mildura, MFC ships out approximately 3.5 million cartons of fruit each year to Australia and overseas markets – the best of which goes straight to Coles supermarkets.

Meeting growing demand Investing in the future

Through strong long-term and loyal relationships with their customers, such as Coles, MFC has been able to significantly invest in its operation.

MFC is one of the world's most technologically-advanced citrus packers, making extensive use of bar code scanning and computerised fruit sizing and sorting equipment.

In recent years, MFC has spent in excess of \$7 million on major

plant upgrades and shed expansion to cope with a steady growth in packing and marketing demand.

MFC's operation consists of two large capacity-packing lines that enable the full range of citrus products to be sorted and packed with little interruption throughout the busy navel season.

MFC employs 40 permanent staff and 150 casual staff to meet seasonal and shift requirements.

Importance to the region The heart of Sunraysia

Mildura is located in the heart of one of Australia's premium fruit growing areas – the Sunraysia district.

Clear days, an abundance of sunshine and the mighty Murray River have transformed an area surrounded by desert into a lush horticultural region.

While the Mildura district is small by world citrus standards, it has produced a number of very popular citrus varieties. The Leng Navel, Late

Lane Navel and more recent summer navels such as the Chislett, Barnfield and Rohde Navel all originate from mother trees in the Murray Valley.

“Our sunshine and cold nights make Sunraysia one of the best citrus growing regions in the world,” says MFC Senior Trader, Marcus Scott.

“We are certainly right up there with the larger regions in South Africa, California and the Mediterranean.”

While the region compares favourably to other regions throughout the world, there is still much they can learn from the other leading growing regions.

MFC employs John Sheiparia, a consultant from Spain, for three months each year.

“John gets out to the orchards and works with growers to look at their product and ways which they can improve quality,” says Marcus.

“This is an area we don't compromise on as our product needs to be of the highest quality to get into the Coles tray.”

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Romeo's Best



A BUNCH OF NUMBERS

200+

The number of people employed by Romeo's Best each year.

2,700

The number of acres that Romeo's Best has planted with vines.

1.35m+

The number of grape vines owned by Romeo's Best.

24

The number of Coles Supermarkets in Far North Queensland that Romeo's Best is supplying direct with white grapes.

14,000

The number of different grape varieties that are trialled for every one picked up commercially

Longer grape supply reduces need for imports

The quantity of grapes that Coles imports from the US each year is falling, thanks to the nation's largest grape producer lengthening its growing period.

Through a strategic growing program across four properties, Romeo's Best can now supply Coles with fresh grapes from September to July.

This year was the first they've been able to guarantee a September crop – enough to stock 24 Coles' stores in Far North Queensland with white and black Australian grapes.

By 2013, they'll be producing grapes all year round.

A year-round supply

Romeo's Best marketing manager Glenn Egan says producing a year round supply is a long term strategy that they've been working towards, in conjunction with Coles, for some time.

It relies on a careful co-ordination of harvests that move south from Mareeba, Emerald and St George in Queensland and, finally, Robinvale in Victoria, from late August/early September until July the following year.

The harvest currently underway at Mareeba is the property's first, and the product of three years hard work to get it up and running.

"Typically at this time, where grapes have traditionally been grown they're dormant – they're having their sleep for the year.

"In the Tropics the plants don't go dormant, so we can strategically manipulate our crop to produce fruit at any time of the year. We can prune it, trigger it to start regrowth and we'll know that five months after that time, we can start the crop."

"Australia imports fruit from the US at this time of year ... We're the only company of any note taking that on with our import replacement strategy."

Currently, there are 100 acres of vines producing grapes on Romeo's Best Mareeba property. Another 100 acres next door to it is also under development, with trellis installed. In another three years, there'll be no down time for the business.

"We'll program to produce fruit at the start of August."

Forward planning

Glenn says that Romeo's Best has a "terrific" relationship with Coles, which has helped the business forward plan to achieve this constant supply.

"We have an open relationship where we sit down and discuss our planning and our programming. We communicate daily in the season, not just on a trading relationship but in regards to market information and intelligence and business planning as well."

He says the Coles buying and quality teams visit Romeo's Best properties regularly. "It's good to get the customer in and have some first hand feedback and advice."

On top of good advice, the assurance that Coles will buy the bulk of Romeo's Best grapes each year lets the business invest in a variety of future goals.

"Without it we wouldn't be investing up north; we wouldn't be investing in new varieties; and we wouldn't be travelling the world looking at best practice: that wouldn't be happening."

Romeo's Best has strong connections with grape growers outside of Australia. "Counter seasonally, we go to America each year where we have relationships with some of the biggest growers in the world."

Aside from this, the business is also involved in breeding programs in the US that will deliver grapes with improved eating and growing qualities.



FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

THE ROMEO BUNCH

Family is central to Romeo's Best, the foundations of which lay in a mixed vegetable enterprise at Robinvale.

Lindsay Romeo manages the production side of the business, while his brother Tony Romeo takes care of the commercial side.

The original Robinvale property was set up by their father, who initially used it to grow vegetable crops. In 1980, the 36 acre farm was converted to vines. Now, with 2700 acres planted with vines at 500 to the acre, three of Lindsay and Tony's sons are keen to carry on the tradition.

Glenn says much of this expansion has occurred in the five year since Romeo's Best started supplying grapes to Coles. "Our business has grown significantly in that time."

The size of the enterprise, however, means that Romeo's Best is now far too big to be simply a family affair. Seasonally, it employs over 200 people, with about 30 full timers.

New varieties

On the horizon

Glenn says there are plans to introduce new grape varieties into the Australian market over the next few years.

Until now the development of new grape varieties has been limited. "There are still varieties today that we've had for 25 years."

It's a slow process and a difficult one. "Trying to breed a fruit takes about 10 years from start to finish.

"During that period of time, the breeders work on 14,000 trials to get one positive outcome.

"Having said that, there is significant work being put into it, particularly in the United States over the last 10 years.

"We're just seeing some new varieties coming into play. These are varieties that are going to allow us to extend the season, which are grower friendly, with bigger crops needing less management, and consumer friendly, with great flavour, great shelf life and great consistency."

Glenn says that although it is a long time between development and harvest, they're not just sitting about waiting. "We've still got our day-to-day management."

How it all works

Day-to-day management

So what does this day-to-day management involve?

Glenn explains that the management of grapes on each of the properties works on a 12 month cycle. In Emerald, for instance, harvest begins in November on white and coloured grapes. Six weeks later, the white grapes are finished and by the end of February so are the coloured grapes.

Once harvest ends, the vines are pruned of old wood and wrapped down in May and June for their period of dormancy.

Contractors carry out this work, which can take up to two months as each vine must be attended to individually.

After two to three months, the vines start to shoot and buds emerge. Says Glenn: "Fingers crossed the frosts stay away as when they're young and tender, they're at their most vulnerable."

Five months after this first bud burst, the grapes are ready to harvest.

There's no rest for those at Romeo's Best, however: "Once we've picked it, packed it and hopefully sold it to Coles, we start all over again."



Q&A

with Romeo's Best marketing manager, Glenn Egan

How would you describe your relationship with Coles?

It's terrific actually. We have an open relationship where we sit down and discuss our planning and our programming. We communicate daily in the season, not just on a trading relationship but in regards to market information and intelligence and short term planning as well.

We have a pretty active program where we welcome the guys onto our property seasonally - we hope to have the buying crew visit on an annual basis at least. As much as we like to think we're doing the right thing, it's good to get the customer in and have a reality check sometimes.

How is Coles helping Romeo's Best with its overall business objectives?

Our business objectives are to continue to grow and get to a point where we have product 12 months of the year and, subsequently, cash flow and business enterprise for 12 months of the year as well. Coles seems pretty keen on working with us to achieve that, providing we can deliver the goods.

The biggest change with Coles in the last two seasons is a willingness to promote the product in season, they've been very

aggressive in their promotion of grapes – I don't think any grape grower could complain about their promotion. In terms of their commitment in selling stock, they've been terrific.

How important is Coles' commitment to running and co-ordinating different locations?

We work hand in hand with Coles to make sure that the season runs productively for all of us. Co-ordinating stock when we move from one farm to another is of the utmost importance to ensure supply meets demand and our customers have stock at all times.

Does Coles commitment also help MFC continue to be at the forefront of new product varieties?

Coles' commitment to our business is driven by a desire to provide customers with the best stock possible at all times. Due to this commitment, our business has the confidence to actively pursue the best new varieties from around the globe.





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," sheds 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.

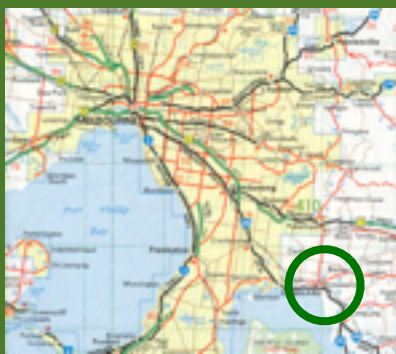
100

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

40

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

Vizzarri Farms



AT A GLANCE

2.1 STATE-OF-THE-ART ASPARAGUS

While the history of asparagus can be dated back to 3000 BC, Vizzarri Farms uses state-of-the-art technology to produce a product of the highest standards.

2.2 JOE VIZZARRI

The Vizzarri family have lived in the Koo Wee Rup area since 1971.

In 1994, Joe Vizzarri started growing asparagus to increase volumes through the packing shed. Plantings now exceed 400 acres.

2.3 Q&A AND SOME STATS

Vizzarri Farms' General Manager Sybrand Visagie on the relationship with Coles and some stats on Vizzarri and the Australian asparagus industry

Plenty of asparagus at Vizzarri Farms

Koo Wee Rup is a burgeoning town 60-odd kilometres south-east of Melbourne. Its name comes from the Bunurong Aboriginal people and is believed to mean "plenty of blackfish".

Today it's not blackfish that Koo Wee Rup has aplenty, but asparagus – the town is responsible for a massive 95 per cent of Australia's asparagus crop.

The cream of this crop is grown by the Vizzarri family who have lived in the area for nearly 40 years.

What started as a business packing locally grown broccoli and asparagus has expanded to an operation of 2,000 acres – a quarter of which was purchased in early 2010 – and five packing sheds.

Sybrand Visagie, General Manager of Vizzarri Farms says the region's temperature, rainfall and water supply make it an ideal location to grow asparagus.

"The climate is perfect here," says Sybrand.

"Asparagus doesn't like it too hot – 40 degrees is pushing it – and we've the perfect soil conditions here also."

Asparagus is Vizzarri Farms' main line, but the farm also produces broccoli and packages nearly half of Australia's broccolini.

Surety of supply Working closely with Coles

With this growth came a recognised need to work more closely with suppliers – in particular, Coles. The closer relationship is also a benefit for Coles, with surety of supply and being able to match supply with demand.

Sybrand says their business is improving as a result.

"In season, we can pack three-to-four thousand or more boxes a day," says Sybrand.

The Vizzarri packing sheds are surrounded by farms. The asparagus picked on these farms can be packed, sent out and arrive at Coles' distribution centres in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia within 24-hours, and within two days for the rest of the country.

Quality of supply Investments in quality

When you're looking after a market the geographical size of all of Europe, looking after the product and maintaining the cool chain is critical.

While Vizzarri Farms has increased the size of their asparagus crop, they have also made significant investments to ensure it is of the highest quality – and a consistent quality.

Two-to-three years ago, they sat down with their transport companies to share with them their expectations of how their product should be transported. It resulted in the transport companies sharing the responsibility for any temperature rises during transit that would adversely affect the quality of the asparagus.

"It only took one claim for the impact of this agreement to take effect," says Sybrand.

"Since then we've had a zero per cent rejection rate from Coles."

Investments inside the packing sheds are also helping improve the quality of asparagus that finds its way to Coles' shelves.

Along with the enormous hydro-coolers (that maintain the perfect temperature for the asparagus as soon as it's picked) one machine that catches the eye features a glass case containing a camera. (cont. page 2)



JOE VIZZARRI

The Vizzarri family have lived in the Koo Wee Rup area since 1971, Mario and Gina having previously been dairy farmers in South Gippsland.

The family started packing locally grown broccoli and asparagus in 1981 when dairying was phased out.

In 1994, Joe Vizzarri started growing asparagus to increase volumes through the packing shed. Plantings now exceed 400 acres.

Joe and his wife, Anne-Marie, have three children - Carla, Nicholas and Christian.

“Asparagus is one of the few vegetables the children like. In the season Nicholas goes out nearly every night to collect some for dinner. We love it steamed or microwaved, with butter, Parmesan and lemon juice, or any recipe with eggs or cheese,” says Joe.

Quality of supply Investments in quality

(from page 1) “This machine does what the human eye cannot,” says Sybrand.

“It takes photos of every asparagus spear and can measure each one’s diameter to the fraction of a millimetre and sort them accordingly.

“It can also determine those spears that may be discoloured, discarding those not up to scratch.”

A scale game A bumper crop

“We can do up to 22,000 six-kilogram boxes a week,” says Sybrand.

“It’s very much a scale game – and with scale comes better bargaining.”

Sybrand says that while it can be stressful work during the season’s peak when the farm employs up to 350 people, the closer relationship with Coles makes life a little easier.

“Coles has really improved their communication with us – particularly when it comes to reacting to opportunities with supply.

“Now if we have a bumper crop overnight due to favourable conditions, we can get on the phone to Coles and get an agreement within a couple of days on an increased order at a better price for consumers due to the abundant supply.

“If you didn’t have the ability to reach such an agreement it would be an opportunity lost for all concerned.”

Clean and green A healthy industry

Asparagus from the Koo Wee Rup region has earned an enviable reputation for being 100 per cent clean, green and safe.

Annual per capita consumption of asparagus in Australia is estimated to be 416g (just over two bunches). Although, this has increased by more than 30 per cent over the last decade, there is plenty of room to include this versatile vegetable in the Australian diet. Annual per capita consumption of asparagus in Switzerland is 1.5kg followed by Germany at 1.12kg.

In Australia, green asparagus is the dominant variety grown, with some white asparagus and a very limited amount of purple asparagus grown during November.

