

Pinata Farms first year of production in Tasmania

Claire McCrory, Berry Industry Development officer, Rubus & Tasmania, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Tasmanians love seeing the BerryWorld raspberries in the supermarket knowing that the fruit is produced locally. The packaging design is attractive, and the distinctive heat-sealed punnet holds the fruit securely. Pinata Farms now have 1,010 ha under cultivation nationwide producing mangoes, pineapples and berries.

Background (1960's – present)

Brothers Gavin and Stephen Scurr began their independent farming careers in 1992, establishing Pinata Farms in Wamuran, an hour's drive north from Brisbane. Pinata was originally a pineapple producing company, a natural crop choice for the siblings as they grew up farming pineapples. Their father Geoff Scurr recalls earning 80 cents an hour in the 1970's to work on his father's pineapple farm and the toils of carrying harvested pineapples out from the field on his back. Pinata Farms became the largest producer of pineapples in Australia.

In the 1990's, changes in import regulations meant that imported pineapples began entering Australia. It was sensible to begin to diversify into other crops to spread any risk which would arise from the loss of market share to imported products. It was at this time that the siblings expanded their operation into melons and mangoes.



Expansion into berries

Woolworths supermarkets approached Pinata in the late 1990's to talk about entering the berry category, as they were looking for a secure supply of strawberries. The decision to grow strawberries wasn't easy and was carefully weighed up against the high amount of labour required to produce the crop and the intensity of the substrate system. Despite this, access to a secure supply contract for Woolworths was highly attractive, and the brothers agreed to explore strawberry production.

Pinata began growing winter strawberries in 2000 at their homesite in Wamuran, now growing the varieties 'Fortuna', 'Red Rhapsody', and 'Sundrench'. In 2013, Pinata began summer strawberry cultivation in Stanthorpe with the variety 'Albion'. This site was chosen for its higher altitude of 990 metres, lower humidity, and lower minimum temperatures. The cooler nights are key to removing the heat from the berry fruits prior to the new day.

In the early days, the transition to berries was a steep learning curve. Time was of the essence; berries were not as robust as pineapples and moisture management was critical for success. The input requirements for temperate berries were a stark contrast to pineapples; a tropical field crop with a biennial fruiting cycle. In addition to this, were the challenges posed by farming in each of the individual climates at each production site.

Partnering with *BerryWorld*

Today, Pinata Farms is the Australian partner of BerryWorld Group, a multinational, based in the UK creating BerryWorld Australia. Pinata is the sole grower in Australia of the exclusive BerryWorld strawberry and raspberry varieties and focuses solely on fruit production.

BerryWorld Australia is responsible for marketing and the interface with consumers, and licences eligible commercial nurseries to provide Pinata with plants propagated from BerryWorld's certified motherstock. Pinata Farms first connected with BerryWorld in 2014 when some of their team travelled to Australia on a business expansion tour. A relationship started and over the next 6 months a joint venture was formed to produce BerryWorld strawberries in Australia.



The relationship between BerryWorld and Pinata is fantastic. They are relaxed, supportive and understand there is some fine-tuning to optimise production in the Australian climate.

As part of the expansion into Australia, there has been some fine-tuning in the production recommendations to accommodate local climate and conditions. Australia has more sunlight than many other berry growing areas in the world, meaning strawberry genetics perform differently in Australia compared to Europe. The warmer weather results in smaller fruit; for instance, in strawberries a 25-gram fruit size in Europe translates to a 20-gram fruit size in Australian conditions. This is an important consideration when fruit size is a market specification.

Achieving year-round production

Pinata Farms expanded into year-round production in 2015 then substrate production systems in 2016; this has involved expanding and developing new production zones across Australia.

The Stanthorpe and Wamuran sites allowed for year-round production of strawberries until 2018, when water shortages in the Stanthorpe region meant that strawberry production was no longer possible. The same year, Pinata further expanded the berry category into BerryWorld raspberries which remained in production at both sites.

To continue year-round raspberry production, Pinata knew it needed to look for a southern site to complement the QLD season. Pinata decided to go south to Tasmania, searching for the most favourable climate for summer production. Surrounded by water on all sides, summer temperatures in Tasmania don't get as high as they do in other areas of mainland Australia. Pinata ultimately settled on a site at Orielton, approximately half an hour's drive from Hobart.

From the outset, the Orielton site had a number of attributes in its favour, including its warm coastal climate with low humidity and access to an underutilised water scheme offering a secure water supply. Being located in southern Tasmania, the site is far away from other raspberry producers in the state's north, strengthening the site's biosecurity.

Lastly, the site's proximity to Hobart ensures ready access to services and labour from Tasmania's largest city. And let's not forget it's close proximity to Hobart airport makes it easy to bring in personnel for seasonal activities where required, although the extra distance to interstate freight services means freight costs are increased.

The establishment of the Orielton site took 18 months, from purchase of the ex-sheep property to the first harvest of substrate produced raspberries. Beginning a new farm brings all sorts of excitement and challenges. A memorable challenge for the farm manager, Mark Salter, was the installation of the tunnel poles and trellis system. Unbeknown to him, the sight was home to an old glacier, leaving a sub-surface pan of stone which required help from an excavator with a hydraulic tip to pre-punch 3,000 holes for the uprights to be installed.

Today, Pinata Farms' Orielton site is a hive of activity as the site continues to expand, with new tunnels being installed regularly. There are already plans in place for introducing strawberries to the site, but for now, Gavin and his team are content to focus on growing the site's raspberry operations.



All images supplied by Pinata Farms.

Gavin & Rebecca Scurr at the Wamuran raspberry farm



Farm Manager Mark Salter at the Orielton site



Pinata Farms Orielton site (3ha of polytunnel raspberries)



BerryWorld raspberries are packed in heat-sealed trays