

# The Road to Diversification

Wendy Morris, Berry Industry Development Officer, Queensland

For some growers, a single variety of a single crop is enough – enough income, enough effort, enough risk! Some others, like SSS Strawberries and Tinaberries, have taken the road less travelled and diversified their operations significantly. While both operations are quite different in scale and approach, what they share is an ongoing commitment to reducing waste, and building resilience in the face of adversity. When faced with tough situations, instead of going broke, they shot for the stars and succeeded.

Both SSS Strawberries and Tinaberries are fortunately located at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef and have a dynamic tourism body which funnels tourists their way, many from interstate. While this accounts for traffic to their farms, it in no way explains their success. The reviews for each farm are full of praise for the taste of the produce, the welcoming hosts and the scenic locations. Their success speaks to their hard work, grit and determination.

## SSS Strawberries — Sticking Together for Success

‘Seven Successful Siblings’ is the origin of the name SSS Strawberries and this family were once seven siblings with no interest or skills in agriculture. All they knew was that their parents needed help growing strawberries in Bundaberg, and they were prepared to pitch in.

The early years were rough on the family who migrated to Australia from Vietnam. Troubles achieving quality and matching it with a market meant that they fell into a worse financial place than when they’d arrived in Australia as refugees. It’s a story that many people can relate to – loans maxed out, favours exhausted, with everyone in the family having a different idea, a different opinion, on how to move forward.

The matriarch eventually gathered the family around and gave some sage advice **‘One stick is easy to break, but a bundle is much harder’**. The siblings understood that they needed to find a way to work together to make a successful business.

The brothers and sisters banded together, purchased the business from their parents, and relaunched it as SSS Strawberries.

They have continued to strive towards success, diversifying operations through a series of ventures. The farm now covers over 140 acres, growing over four million strawberry plants, making SSS Strawberries one of the larger strawberry growers in Australia.



The SSS village. Photo credit: SSS Strawberries

The SSS Village is an example of their innovation. The 30-unit, gated worker's accommodation has built in security, ample parking spaces and common outdoor areas including a gym, barbeque and basketball court. Located just a five-minute walk to a local supermarket, and under ten minutes' drive to Bundaberg, with twice weekly transport to night shopping and other activities, it's a perfect – and low cost – method of providing accommodation for their workers. Gina Dang credits it with allowing farm operations to continue throughout the pandemic and is a major drawcard for temporary staff as it solves a major problem for them.

Opened on the farm in 2011, The Strawberry Shop offers a range of homemade jam, chocolate coated strawberries, barista coffee, Banh Mi, desserts and much more. One of the most recent additions to the range is home-made fresh strawberry iced tea, which has proven a success with customers.

The highly successful 'High Tea on the Strawberry Field' experience provides a more elegant alternative to eating at the farm shop and cafe. The scent of ripe strawberries hangs in the air, as guests get close to nature while enjoying a delicious afternoon tea.

The latest innovation is 'Gina's Table' – a freeze dried selection of fruit with some surprising twists. Each pack is a delicate crunch made of 100% fruit.

What makes SSS Strawberries' story incredible is the resilience they've shown. With no family money to back them up, they have had to rely on their wits, willingness to learn, and most importantly, on each other.

There are now twelve grandchildren involved in the business, with 14-year-old Ruby Rose pledging to 'grow and evolve the seed'.



**(L-R) Cindy Dang, Trinity Dang, Lyn Nguyen, Toan Nguyen, Gen Nguyen, Thanh Dang, Rena Dang, Gina Dang, Lilly Dang and Victor Dang.** Photo credit: SSS Strawberries

## Tinaberries — putting your name on the line

Tinaberries has never been just a production farm. Right from their inception 17 years ago, the Pick Your Own has operated alongside traditional farming and wholesale supply operations. Farm owners Tina and Bruce McPherson have always understood that inviting families to come and enjoy berries straight from the field rebuilds connections with growers and the land and is helpful when fruit supply is high and wholesale prices are not!

While the public may think of a strawberry crisis as the needle tampering event of 2018, like many growers Tina found the real crisis to be the annual strawberry gluts leading to prices plummeting well below the cost of production in the peak of the season. It was not just the low financial return at this stage of the season but the sheer wastage that began to prey on Tina's mind.

Tina was in the fortunate position of having access to commercial kitchen facilities, they just needed to be dismantled and rebuilt. An old ice-cream churn was refurbished, and the production of fresh berry and passionfruit ice cream commenced, alongside jams and butters.

Despite being open just one day a week for 'Ice Cream Sundays', the new venture was so popular that the decision was made to freeze berries and other fruits for use during the off season. The popularity of Tinaberries strawberry ice cream increased exponentially, and the farm shop is now open 363 days a year. Adding to the experience is a garden for visitors to sit in and enjoy their ice-cream.



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**1. Tina McPherson; 2. Strawberry ice cream is a top seller and major drawcard for visitors; 3. Some of the additional products available for sale from the Tinaberries farm shop 3.** Photo credit: Tinaberries

Tina is open about the challenges. Planning regulations can be painful to navigate, with current laws providing limited pathways for growers to offer on-farm activities. Agri-tourism, which has taken off in other states, is stifled by both Queensland state and local council legislation.

There is also the lack of privacy when your farm and home are opened up to the public. Almost everything is done in the public eye. Tina highlights that down time needs to be structured in, and the small moments of privacy, peace and relaxation need to be appreciated when then can be found.

The biggest challenge, Tina notes, is avoiding over consumption of your own product! Which is difficult when it's available right down the driveway...

## Planning a visit?

Both SSS Strawberries and Tinaberries welcome visitors to their farms.

### SSS Strawberries

SSS Strawberries offers PYO from **mid-August to the end of November**. The Strawberry shop is open from 7am to 5pm, 7 days a week during the strawberry season (May to November).



Find out more at [sss-strawberries.com.au](http://sss-strawberries.com.au)

### Tinaberries

Pick your own is available during **August, September and October** at Tinaberries, with the real fruit ice-cream available 10am to 5pm for 363 days a year.



Find out more at [tinaberries.com.au](http://tinaberries.com.au)

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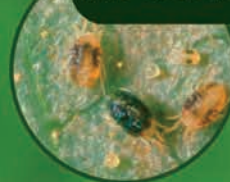
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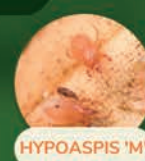
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