

# Profile: The Clark Family – Both Growers & Processors

Claire McCrory, Berry Industry Development Officer, Fruit Growers Tasmania

Richard Clark is a second-generation berry farmer. He was raised on the family farm, Lanoma Estate, in Westerway approximately an hours' drive from Hobart.

After secondary college he went to The University of Tasmania and studied Economics. He is 36 years old and lives with his wife Claudia and son Louis between the farm in Tasmania and Sydney, New South Wales in the off-season.

The Clark family are one of the few Australian commercial producers who also process both raspberries and blackcurrants. Richard's parents first bought 50 acres of land on the fertile river flats along the Tyenna River in 1977. Today the business operates four mechanical harvesters (imported from the US and NZ) to harvest more than 200 tonnes of berries annually and has facilities onsite to freeze whole or puree fruit with the seed either retained or removed.

Fruit from Westerway are found in a variety of premium Tasmanian products including jams, juices, ice-cream, liquors, sauces, vinegars, teas and dried fruits. They offer an amazing family friendly pick-your-own experience on farm at Westerway with onsite licenced café and picnic area.

## Growing up in the berry patch

The Westerway Raspberry farm was established in 1995 and the business still has strong links to the whole family. Richard's aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings are employed at the farm gate sales and café, delivering fruit into Hobart daily during peak season, growing the fruit and managing the business and social media.

Richard's parents planted their first small block of blackcurrants in 1995 (and raspberries in 1998) to supply fruit for the production of Ultra-C fruit syrup by Cascade Brewery in South Hobart.

The increasing popularity of the drink meant in 1997 his family decided to expand into raspberries to provide fruit for the diversifying Cascade syrup range.

The Clarks planted an acre of raspberries in 1998. Richard has fond memories of spending summer days as a 12-year-old riding on the mechanical harvester sorting bugs and sticks from the currants. Richard recalls their first raspberry harvest was highly memorable, as the old mechanical harvester wasn't operational and ripe fruit was just falling onto the ground instead.

His father Robert, working full-time at the School of Agriculture at the University of Tasmania, put the challenge to Richard, "See if you can do anything with all this ripe fruit to make some money".

Richard's father sourced some punnets and his mum drove 15-year-old Richard around Hobart consulting the yellow pages to find fruit and veggie stores in the hope that someone wanted to buy his raspberries. Eddy Chu, from the A-One Fruit Market, gave Richard his first go and agreed to buy his fruit. By the second year, Richard had three customers thanks to Eddy's support. By the third year, his business had grown again through recommendations.

Richard reflects on a childhood Christmas where an order for 200 punnets came through on Christmas Eve... an unachievable feat for a single boy, so his family stepped in and spent Christmas Eve helping to pick fruit to fill the orders.





Westerway offers a pick-your-our berry harvesting experience.

Photo credit: FGT



Westerway has onsite farmgate sales, licenced café & picnic area.

Photo credit: FGT



Westerway Farm blackcurrant syrup

Photo credit: Amy Clark



Autumn raspberries

Photo credit: Amy Clark



## Producing berries for processing

Today, only 10% of Westerway's fruit crop are picked and sold as fresh fruit; at the farm gate, pick-your-own or fresh deliveries into Hobart to be eaten and enjoyed immediately. The remaining 90% is machine harvested for processing and freezing. The lower prices for processed and frozen fruit mean the business uses a production system involving low inputs to keep overheads low.

Once frozen, berries are not limited by shelf-life. They are then traded as a commodity which involves competing with berry products grown in other countries with much lower costs of production.



**There are markets for Australian grown frozen berries, but they tend to be niche and involve lower volumes while there is large demand for fresh berries. This is the main reason we are the only mechanical harvesters in Australia. We wouldn't be doing processed berries if we didn't have reliable and long-established customers and contracts to sell our fruit products.**

## A new chapter for a beloved product

Westerway originally supplied processing fruit to Cascade Brewery to produce their blackcurrant and raspberry syrups. After the sale of the Brewery in 2012, ownership of the rights and recipes for these syrups was transferred to Coca-Cola Amatil, who continued the brand. A change in the recipe in 2013 meant the product was no longer a favourite for Tasmanian consumers.

Coca-Cola Amatil returned to using the original recipe, but declining category sales and supply chain challenges left the company contemplating discontinuing the product. The Clark family approached Coca-Cola Amatil to consider returning the brand to Tasmania. An announcement was made earlier this year, after Westerway reached an agreement with Coca-Cola Amatil for the recipe and rights to their blackcurrant and raspberry syrup range.

“These fruit syrups were adored by Tasmanians and a popular childhood staple. We have received countless requests and questions from passionate Tasmanian consumers over many years and we are now delighted to confirm the return of their favourite syrups.”

## Thoughts on fruit waste

Reducing waste is a contemporary topic of discussion across the industry. We asked Richard for advice for those berry growers thinking of processing their own waste after two decades producing fruit for processing.

“It's putting the cart before the horse; you often don't know if there's a market for processed berries before you process berries. Everyone hates seeing waste, but it's often wise to secure a market for the processed fruit before you make the investment.”

To put this into context, whole frozen topped Chinese strawberries can cost \$2/kg landed in Sydney; whereas it can cost \$2/kg just for a Tasmanian worker to sit down with a knife and cut the tops off.

“All farm businesses have a fixed amount of resources to produce fruit and vegetables and remain profitable. You might need to ask yourself: Am I better using farm resources to increase pack-out from 90 to 91% to supply high value markets for instant returns or do I muck around with 10% of fruit that we would normally throw away, pay for its frozen storage before it may eventually be sold on a commodity market at a price possibly below the cost of production and processing?”  
Food for thought.

