

Profile: Blue Hills Berries & Cherries, Victoria

Jane Richter & Angela Atkinson, Berries Australia

There are not many farms in Australia that can say they are about to celebrate their 130-year anniversary this year but that is the case here at Blue Hills Berries & Cherries nestled on the outskirts of the Yarra Valley in Silvan, Victoria. The Chapman family were one of the first berry growers in the area starting out in 1894 having come from England to find a new life in the 'colonies'. William Chapman came from Charlotte Plains (later called Carisbrook), near Maryborough Victoria with his brother Walter in 1892. Both worked for another farmer in Wandin for two years and lived on his land before each purchasing their own properties. The land bought by William all those years ago has been continuously farmed by members of the same family ever since and is run today by Kevin and Tracey Chapman.

This part of the original farm now covers about 50 acres growing cherries, boysenberries, raspberries, blueberries and strawberries across three separate blocks in the area. If you go back three generations, the farm was apparently the largest strawberry grower in the southern hemisphere, but the land has been divided up as it has passed down resulting in three sets of Chapmans all farming today along Parker Road.

The farm is unusual in that all sales are made from the onsite farm shop or as 'Upick' – also known as 'pick your own' or 'PYO'. The Chapmans don't package and send any of their fruit to the wholesale markets at all.

"For us, Upick is the only way we can work as a small farm business. We like the lifestyle, and we enjoy the work, but to grow and pack berries commercially I think you need to be a big operation these days," says Kevin.

"We've created our own little niche market as we can't compete with the big growers in the wholesale markets. You know the berry prices in the supermarket – the \$3 a punnet – that hasn't changed in 20 years and all the costs have quadrupled in the same time," says Tracey.

Berries are a very labour-intensive crop both in the maintenance and harvesting parts of the growing cycle, and so operating as 100% Upick makes sense economically for the couple and allows them to have some portions of the year when they can literally step away from the farm to have a proper break.

"If you can reduce your workload and have some kind of work-life balance, its much better," says Tracey.

The farm offers Upick cherries from mid-November to early January, and berries from mid-October until June. The strawberry patches produce fruit across this full berry harvest window, but the raspberries fit into two separate windows; usually November and a second crop in February each year

The Chapmans grow the publicly-available *Sandford* raspberry variety, and the patch has been established now for 15 years. As a florican variety, each year the canes re-sprout and they dig the new canes out and re-plant them back in the row line to reinvigorate the patch.



L-R: Kevin Chapman and Murray Chapman. Photo credit: VSICA



The Sandford raspberry canes loaded with flowers and new fruit ready for the February harvest
Photo credit: Jane Richter

Sandford is not a variety that is found frequently these days as it produces a small berry that is no good for the commercial markets, but their customers really like the flavour and the canes have never let them down. The berries are a deep red, medium sized fruit with full fruity flavour. A high yielding variety that are also one of the earliest raspberry varieties available from the Yarra region and produce fruit in time for Christmas each year!

Over the 130-year history, the farm has made a significant impact in people's lives. Tracey told us the story of the Wellman family that have been visiting the farm every single year for the last 30 years to pick raspberries. The family members are spread all over Victoria, but each year they all come together to spend the day picking raspberries and enjoying time together, often twice in the season to line up with the peak of the two raspberry crops. It's become a family tradition that means Tracey and Kevin have seen the current generation of the family grow up and start bringing their own children.

Even a 100% Upick business model has its challenges and labour is top of the list. As the farm cannot offer year-round employment getting the right people to support the growing, maintenance and customer service components is tricky. Blue Hills has chosen to employ mostly local people which they top up as needed with Working Holiday Makers.

"We try and get as many local people as we can because most of our work is really customer service - we're not picking and packing fruit. Good English and local knowledge are valuable, but on the other hand, the backpackers can be much more willing to work long days as they are looking to maximise their earnings," explains Tracey.

Unfortunately, the farm sits just on the wrong side of the postcode boundary which means that they are not able to offer work which qualifies for the 88 days for the Working Holiday Visa.

The weather has played havoc with the harvest this year with extreme temperature fluctuations and rain at completely the wrong time. Despite forecasts for a long dry summer this has been a particularly wet year. Like many other fruit growers, native pests like birds, bats and rabbits are a problem and the Chapmans use a combination of table-top growing, fencing and netting to combat the pest threat.

It's definitely not all doom and gloom for this pair though. Their adult children are now showing an interest in taking over the farm in the medium-term, providing Kevin and Tracey with a much-needed succession plan for this family heirloom.

Despite the hard work and long hours during the harvest season, both Kevin and Tracey express how much they enjoy the work. "There's always something to do. It's like any small business owner, you're always thinking about work, but it is a lifestyle, and we get our winters to ourselves and then we can go away on holidays which many farms don't get the luxury of doing. It's also a beautifully peaceful lifestyle," explains Tracey.

Outside of cherry season (which is short but operates 7 days a week), the Upick is open for 3 days spread across the week; currently Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. This structure allows for the fruit supply to recover after a big pick and makes sure that customers aren't disappointed by the fruit available.

The Chapmans have harnessed the power of technology and for the cherry season they sell tickets online with a fixed picking time slot. This allows them to balance the number of people on the property safely with ensuring everyone has the best quality of fruit to pick and all the cherries actually get picked.

For berries, a customer buys a ticket at the farm shop (\$15 for adults, under 5's are free, \$7.50 for school-aged children) and they are supplied with a take home container which holds approximately 500g of fruit or a bucket lined with a clean plastic bag for the big pickers. Guests can stay as long as they like on the farm and importantly can eat as much as they like as they are picking. If they want to take fruit home in the container provided the charge is currently \$10 per kg for strawberries and \$16 per kg for blueberries. The raspberry patch was between-crops when we visited, but the per kg price is set based on market prices at the time of harvest.

Guests really enjoy the farm experience and are welcome to bring a picnic blanket and enjoy time on the rolling hillsides of the farm. Customers are very happy with these arrangements, and its particularly popular with city-based families giving a full experience for kids and adults alike and only 1 hour from Melbourne CBD. The couple also throw in special events like live music, an on-site café and farm shop selling fresh and frozen berries and local gourmet food products to enhance the customer experience during the peak of the season.

Helpful tips for running a U-Pick operation

Harness technology to help the process run smoothly

You need a good digital presence to communicate with potential customers so ensure that you have a clear website that is easy to find and navigate, displays up-to-date information about your location, where to park, opening hours and what you offer, and use social media channels like Facebook and Instagram as ways to provide realtime updates to customers.

Check with your workers as often you'll have someone working in your team that has the skills to assist you with social media even if you're not a whizz yourself!

Make sure you include a good Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on your website to help manage visitors' expectations about their experience with your farm

Consider providing a daily Fruit Report each evening which summarises what fruit is available for the next Upick day

Consider setting up an online ticketing system where people book and pay for a picking timeslot in advance

- ✓ Helps you to control visitor numbers at peak times
- ✓ If people cancel at the last minute, you can choose whether to issue a refund or not
- ✓ It shows your professionalism
- ✓ Allows you to only sell as many tickets as you think you'll have fruit for

Leverage the help that is available to promote your business

Connect with all the local tourism bodies, tourist information centres and other agritourism operations in your area to raise the profile of your business offer

Get involved with food trails and other marketing initiatives that will help to attract customers to your business

Connect with local industry associations too to help promote your business

Consider creating a simple flyer that can be shared at tourism venues, local cafes and other businesses to help generate awareness and a professional perception of your offer

Do the right thing to manage your risks

Ensure you have plenty of off-street designated car parking that is clearly signposted

Make friends with your local council as you need to know what you can and can't do, and what they will be focused on like traffic control or food safety

Make friends with your neighbours and talk to them in advance about what you want to do, if you are adding a Upick component to your business and this will impact them in some way. Keep really open channels of communication with them so they can come to you with any concerns about traffic, noise and litter for example. It's far better that you sort any issues out together than they take their complaints to the council or other authorities that may result in you being penalised or your operation being shut down

Minimise your liability insurance costs by keeping on top of all the small maintenance tasks around the farm, identifying and fixing trip hazards, and keeping your safety signage clear and relevant

Ensure you have good quality signage – in relevant languages or using images - to guide people around the farm and communicate how they need to behave

Have the right facilities to support a good customer experience

You will need toilets, hand washing and potentially accessible toilets for disabled guests

It doesn't have to be a permanent facility as even a well-maintained port-a-potty loo will suffice for a short period

Consider providing some seating areas where customers can relax and enjoy your farm surroundings safely

Think about adding café offers like coffee, simple food or ice cream to enhance the experience

Visit other agritourism businesses to see what works