Food Waste Reduction: Gina's Table

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It's an unfortunate fact of farming that not all fruit will meet retailer standards. Food waste has significant impacts on people, the planet and our industry's profitability, however finding a home for 'seconds' fruit or knowing what to do with fruit that is uneconomical to harvest, remains a challenge for many growers.

At SSS Strawberries in Bundaberg, the sheer amount of waste troubled General Manager, Gina Dang and her family. As a larger farm, it wasn't uncommon for pallets of fruit to be considered under sized, oversized or too cosmetically damaged for retail sale. During periods of high production, the costs of picking fruit often exceeded the market price.

Frustrated at the level of waste, and rather than accept this waste as part of the system, Gina was driven by a bigger vision. With a mission to create a future where "*every meal is a celebration of sustainability, every farmer stands tall, and every plate tells a story of success*," she founded **Gina's Table** — a food manufacturing company dedicated to transforming surplus produce into something truly valuable.

Gina began her research and collaborated with the End Food Waste Australia Cooperative Research Centre and Department of Primary Industries QLD to help develop, test and create suitable products.

Initially, fruit from the farm was sent away for contract drying and packing, however a desire for autonomy and concerns about potential contamination, lead to investment in a state-of-the-art facility freezing and freeze-drying in Bundaberg. This sentence makes the process seem straightforward, but it took over five years from research, planning to construction, and importing the freeze-drying fans was a multi-million dollar exercise.

The range of fruits processed has expanded from strawberries to include raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, mangoes, apples, watermelon, finger limes and more. Most fruit is now prepared and frozen on site using specialised machinery.

Gina's Table proudly introduces a 100% Australian range of frozen berries named Merries™, along with healthy freeze-dried fruit snack collections under the Happles™ brand that are perfect for lunchboxes or on-the-go healthy snacking.

They also offer a premium range of natural freeze-dried ingredients, including powders and crumbles, ideal for smoothies, ice creams, natural flavouring, and adding a delicious decorative touch to cakes and desserts.

To reduce waste even further, any leftover fruit scraps from the preparation process are sent to a business in Childers, where they are turned into compost.

Today, Gina's Table products are sold directly from their farm store, at selected boutique health food stores, IGA supermarkets, and to food manufacturers who turn their products into delicious ice creams, chocolates and more.

From humble beginnings, Gina's Table has become a growing movement — one that invites everyone to come together to Gina's Table, where no fruit is forgotten, no effort wasted, and no story untold.

Gina's Table invites growers, retail buyers, distributors, and food processors who share its values of sustainability, circular economy, and community impact to join its mission. By collaborating with Gina's Table, partners play a vital role in reducing food waste, supporting Australian farmers, and giving delicious yet imperfect fruit a second life. Together, they are creating a more resilient and thoughtful food system, one that values every harvest and honours the hands that grow it.

Perpared strawberries ready for freeze drying in the on-site custom-built system

The new Gina's Table range features the Happles™ brand of apple based products and the Merries™ range of berry based snacks

All photos credit: Gina's Table

Freeze-Drying Berries: How Does It Work?

As consumer demand grows for shelf-stable, nutrient-rich berry products, freeze-drying is emerging as a premium preservation method that delivers on quality, taste, and versatility. But what exactly is freeze-drying—and how does it work?

What Is Freeze-Drying?

Freeze-drying, or lyophilisation, is a specialised drying process that removes moisture from food while preserving its structure, flavour, and nutrients. It's particularly well-suited to berries, allowing them to retain their natural shape and colour—unlike other drying methods that can shrink or darken the fruit.

The Commercial Process

Preparation

Berries are carefully selected, washed, and sorted. In some cases, they may be halved or sliced to ensure even drying.

Freezing

The fruit is frozen rapidly to very low temperatures—typically below -40°C. Quick freezing helps protect the cell structure, which is critical for maintaining texture after drying.

Primary Drying (Sublimation)

The frozen berries are placed into a vacuum chamber. A gentle heat is applied, causing the ice in the berries to convert directly from solid to vapour without passing through the liquid phase. This phase removes the majority of the moisture.

Secondary Drying (Desorption)

Once the visible ice is gone, the temperature is slightly raised to remove any remaining bound moisture. The result is an ultra-dry product which is typically less than 4% moisture content.

Packaging

The dried berries are packed in moisture-proof, oxygen-resistant containers to preserve their crispness and shelf life. Packaging often includes oxygen absorbers to protect the product during storage and transport.

Freeze-dried berries have an impressive shelf life. When properly sealed and stored in a cool, dry place, they can last between 12 to 25 years, particularly in commercial or emergency food applications. However, for most consumer retail products, the typical shelf life is 1 to 2 years unopened. Once opened, berries should be kept in airtight containers and used within a few weeks to maintain their texture and flavour. Moisture is the main threat to longevity, so proper packaging and storage are key.

Freeze-drying opens up new market opportunities for Australian berry growers by extending the product's shelf life without relying on additives or refrigeration. The end product is light, portable, and highly nutritious making it ideal for snack foods, baking ingredients, cereals, and health food markets. It also allows for the use of second-grade fruit that may not meet fresh market standards but still holds excellent flavour and nutritional value.

As interest in functional foods and low-waste processing grows, freeze-drying could be a valuable addition to Australia's berry value chain, particularly for growers with large amounts of on-site waste wanting to explore product diversification or export opportunities.