



ADDRESSING CONSUMERS' HEALTH AND DIETARY CONCERNS WITH POTATOES

A new potato variety was sourced across the Tasman to provide consumers with a lower carbohydrate potato option. Lotatoes™ potatoes have proven to be a success in the supermarket as well as the wider industry, after the campaign by T&G Global in New Zealand won the company the Marketer of the Year award at Hort Connections 2018.

BUSINESS GROWTH CONTRIBUTES TO TASSIE POTATO INDUSTRY

One year on from opening a new coolstore in Tasmania, seed potato operator Agronico has many more plans in store for the business and the state's potato industry. *Potatoes Australia* reports.

As is the case with any plant, the quality of the seed itself plays a crucial role in the resulting yield and condition of the crop.

Tasmanian seed potato operator Agronico knows this only too well, growing over 9,000 tonnes of certified seed potatoes each year. The business operates a hydroponic mini-tuber production facility, which produces about 250,000 mini-tubers annually for clients across Australia as well as its own seed production program.

Over the past five years, the business has executed a strategic growth plan that began with investment in infrastructure, culminating in the launch of a new coolstore in Tasmania last year. This coolstore allows potatoes to be stored in an environment where temperature, carbon dioxide levels and humidity are continually monitored and controlled.

Since then, the improvement of processes, efficiency and the end product continues to remain front of mind. Following a contribution from the Australian Government's Regional Jobs and Investment Package, plans are now set to expand Agronico's coolstore operations with the construction of a second facility in 2019.

The new coolstore will feature an additional eight rooms (almost doubling the current space) to provide added storage to the business as well as Tasmanian agribusinesses and farmers. The rooms have different temperature controls, allowing for commodities such as berries, broccoli and carrots to be stored in addition to potatoes.

"The coolstore maximises the opportunity for high-quality seed, which is vital for high yield and therefore valuable for our farmers," Agronico CEO Robert Graham said.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE POTATOES

As a technology-led company, Agronico realises the importance of ongoing research and development to solve the problems that farmers encounter, with a dedicated team of researchers running trials throughout the year.

In this vein, the business has been researching the process of mini-tuber production for over 20 years, and has continued to develop the science of seed potato propagation through investment in tissue culture and hydroponics.

"By growing potato mini-tubers hydroponically, we get a more uniform tuber size, the system is predictable and we can fulfil ordered volumes more consistently," Mr Graham said.

As part of their service to clients, Agronico obtains and stores around 150 varieties of potatoes in 'in-vitro' tissue culture form. These cultures are sourced worldwide from a variety of providers and are subject to rigorous disease testing to ensure the material is of the highest quality.

When not being multiplied for commercial production, the varieties are stored on long-term suspension media under sterile laboratory conditions.

"During mini-tuber production, an emphasis is placed on timing the break of dormancy and optimising physiological age. The aim of this is to ensure a dependable, uniform crop with good vigour that produces high numbers of tubers. This takes priority over yield," Agronico Minituber Production Manager Stewart McKay said.

"Interestingly, because we can observe the entire plant structure during the hydroponic mini-tuber production phase, we get a unique insight into specific variety characteristics that can importantly assist with field production."

EXPANDING BUSINESS, EXPANDING MARKETS

Mr Graham said Agronico's seed production has grown significantly in the last five years and growth is expected to continue for customers both interstate and overseas.

"There are many opportunities for agricultural businesses and this will only expand with the opening up of export markets," he said.

"We have been approached to supply premium grade seed potatoes to several Asian countries, so we know there are market opportunities and Tasmanian farmers are interested in exporting their crops.

"We are committed to improving our product and providing opportunities for growers and contractors in Tasmania. We're very optimistic about the future potential of Tasmanian agriculture."

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For more information, please visit agronico.com.au.

The humble spud has had its fair share of bad publicity in recent years due to the 'low-carbohydrate' movement which has seen some consumers choose to shift away from potatoes and reach for lower-carb options such as sweetpotato and salads, to prevent perceived weight gain.

However, New Zealand-based fresh produce company T&G Global is attempting to change consumer attitudes towards potatoes through its new Lotatoes™ potatoes variety. This is a lower carb and lower calorie variety that is naturally bred and grown by Balle Bros and Master & Sons in two potato growing regions in New Zealand: Ohakune and Pukekohe.

T&G Global Marketing Manager Michelle Singh highlighted the demand for this innovative variety of potato in New Zealand.

"We can't keep up with demand. We've sold over two million Lotatoes™ potatoes in the market and this continues to grow as more consumers taste these delicious, locally-grown lower carb potatoes," she said.

Due to the success of this variety, T&G has also introduced an extension to the range – Baby Lotatoes™, for consumers who prefer smaller, gourmet-sized potatoes.

This innovation and commitment to bringing lost consumers back to the potato category helped T&G Global take home the Marketer of the Year award at Hort Connections 2018 in June.

The goal for us was to deliver innovation around nutrition, convenience and flavour while still highlighting the functional health benefits of our new potato.

TARGETING CONSUMER NEEDS

The process of developing this product from seed to retail pack took over five years and included grower and customer input.

T&G consumer research initially identified that consumers are looking for healthy options for foods that fit their lifestyle and diet, noting that health and wellness are one of the biggest trends driving New Zealand supermarkets.

"Our aim was to address these concerns for our target audience by understanding their insights and needs – both functional and emotional – to attract them back to the category," Mrs Singh said.

"The goal for us was to deliver innovation around nutrition, convenience and flavour while still highlighting the functional

health benefits of our new potato for these shoppers in a very competitive environment."

With consumer needs at its core, a lower carb and lower calorie potato variety was specifically sought from T&G's breeding partners. The variety was then bred naturally via cross pollination techniques.

"Extensive testing against two of New Zealand's most common varieties (Rua and Agria) proved a unique 40 per cent lower carbohydrate product that could be boiled, mashed and baked and was flavoursome – meeting the functional and health needs of this group of consumers," Mrs Singh said.

The potatoes contain vitamin B6, potassium and dietary fibre, and are a convenient option for increasingly time-poor consumers as they can be ready to eat in under 10 minutes.

AN AWARD-WINNING PRODUCT

T&G was quick to spread the word of its Marketer of the Year award to media, industry partners and other stakeholders.

"Our growing partners and retail partner (Woolworths New Zealand) were equally excited by the win," Mrs Singh said.

"The variety ranked within the top 10 selling potato products in Countdown supermarkets nationally and continues to hold

this position a year after launch, highlighting a strong offer and repeat purchases for our consumers."

The company – which grows produce locally and works with more than 1,500 growers internationally, and is New Zealand's largest exporter of fresh produce – was proud to be recognised for its contribution to the horticulture industry.

"As a business, the awards our Lotatoes™ brand has won puts T&G at the forefront of new and existing customers; introduces us to new consumers; and cements our status as a leader of global fresh produce, committed to innovation but also safe, healthy fruit and vegetables."

INFO

For more information, please visit tandg.global/our-produce/lotatoes.