

# Australian Certified Organic goes Tropical in Fiji

Wild Noni Trees, Fiji Islands.



Guava grove in Sigatoka, Fiji. The fruit is made into a 100% fruit pulp which is packaged into aseptic packaging for export.

» By **Jamie Newborn**

**S**leepy towns in the tropical hinterlands of Fiji may seem miles away from the realities of every day; however the efforts of a few select Australian Certified Organic (ACO) Fijian operators means organic aficionados can enjoy the exotic flavours of Fiji, world-wide.

Around 2700km from the East Coast of Australia, two ACO certified companies produce unique 'Wild Harvest' fruit products from unspoilt regions of the island famous for its isolated beauty.

Customers in Europe, Australia & NZ can now sample Fiji-grown Noni juice and Noni fruit products from Herbex Ltd; while organic manufacturers and processors in Australia & NZ, Europe and the US have access to a range of 100% fruit purees from Agrana Fruit Ltd.

With no certification bodies local to the islands, the businesses turned to organic certification from Australia for a means of promoting the chemical-free and natural production which has been the norm in the region for decades.

"The (Fiji) coral coast and its hinterland are basically untouched

– the area is very pristine," says George Fung General Manager of Agrana Fruit (certified for Organic Wild Harvest and fruit processing).

"Agrana Fruit started as a small family-owned business in 1963 near a quiet town called Sigatoka along the coral coast of the main island, Viti Levu. It consisted then of a small cannery and cold storage, processing fruit and vegetable sourced from neighbouring farmers.

"Today, we process tropical fruits (bananas, mangoes and guava) into 100% fruit pulp which we package into aseptic packaging to export. (Aseptic packaging features a tight polyethylene inside layer which 'seals out' microbiological organisms and contaminants, allowing for food storage without preservatives.)

"The mango and guava fruit is wild harvested and not 'cultivated' as such. The guava and mango groves have been established for years – the mangos owe their origins to the Australian CSR company back in the 1890's. Trees are on village land and harvested by villagers, by hand."

He says while the combination of weather variability (harvest time coincides with Fiji's cyclone season), factory demands and interactions with villagers can be challenging – "there is never a dull moment!" - the end result is a worthy one.

"I believe our purees are first class, as is the ACO certification. I also believe organics will come more and more into a mainstream focus, as attention is turned to the environment in which goods are produced."

Gerhard Stemmler, Director of Herbex Ltd agrees.

"Organic was still the usual way of growing food when I began my horticultural apprentice (in Germany, 1958) and for me, 'going organic' was one of the prerequisites for healthy food," he says.

"Growing without residues of poisonous fertilizers and sprays - who could disagree?"

As one of several investors in a Noni Juice manufacturing plant in Fiji in 1999, Gerhard put his hand up to be at the coal-face of the operation, stationed on-site in Fiji as plant manager.

"Our main product is Noni Juice (marketed as a high-health beverage) in bottles, which we supply to both established and remote markets with the aid of the Internet" says Gerhard who also has worked intensively in the computer industry for several years. "We aim to ship within 12 – 24 hours of payment of any order."

He says the Fijian Noni Juice made by Herbex Ltd. (branded as goodnoni®) is derived from 'wild harvest' trees of the Morinda

**“There are several opportunities for medium sized businesses of this kind in Fiji. We [Herbex] currently already provide a small range of Noni-lotion, soap and crème.”**

Citrifolia plant – a member of the Rubiaceae or coffee family, with fruit similar to that of a mulberry.

The fruit is growing wild outside forests in low lying areas and picked ripe regularly by contract harvesters.

“Fiji has large areas of bush which have never seen any form of cultivation and has much potential for organic production, and Noni fruit can grow all year” says Gerhard. “There is also an endless source of raw material for composting from surrounding grass and bushes.”

He says Noni fruit must be picked and graded rigorously to ensure a strong final product, which is promoted on its specific health attributes.

Noni Juice has a naturally bitter taste, which is not always pleasing,” he says.

“Our Noni juice is made the traditional way and allowed to mature, which improves the taste – and we ensure any unripe, damaged or rotten fruit is immediately rejected. However the most important part of our quality control is the measurement of Brix (phyto chemicals-to-water ration) and pH.

“High Brix - at least 7.5 – indicates the amount of phytochemicals, including amino acids, in the product is high. Of 20 amino acids, 9 essential acids cannot be produced by the body and must be taken in through the diet. Goodnoni® is marketed for health because the product, derived from wild harvest fruit, contains a total of 17 of these

20 amino acids (including the total nine essential amino acids) in stronger than average levels.”

Gerhard says the company is also looking to expand into organic raw materials and organic cosmetics.

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He says the demand for organic is growing worldwide, and that produce that is grown as naturally as possible will be welcomed.

“My memories of ‘wild harvest’ take me back to Germany to places where wild blackberries and strawberries grew. These kinds of fruits have so much flavour and natural goodness which I believe is no longer available in the high yielding breeds which flood the market now. We are focusing on a different kind of production here.”



Ripe Noni Fruit.

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