



Visionary value-adding

» By Michele Smith

From wheat to what else?" is the question Neil Druce of Green Grove Organics asked himself over a decade ago. And the answer surprised even him. Licorice and lots of tourists are the double-barrelled ways he has added value to the certified organic wheat and spelt crops from the fourth generation family farm.

Since the 1960s the 1100 hectare Druce farm in Western New South Wales has grown grain, mostly wheat, without the use of chemicals. In those days, Neil's father Alan was thought of a radical for using only organic methods. The farm is now one of Australia's longest-established organic farms, producing wheat, spelt, oats, sheep and cattle.

But in an attempt to get higher returns from the wheat crop, in addition to stone milling flour, Neil Druce let his imagination run wild and pursued an idea almost everyone considered crazy.

"My dream, and Dad's as well, was that I wanted to take something to the

customer. I wanted to be able to put a name on our product and sell it straight to the customer," Neil said.

"We looked at all sorts of things: pasta and cookies and scones and meat pies. They all had drawbacks – other people were already doing them, they had a short shelf-life and there was difficulty in getting the machinery together. When we came across the idea of licorice I didn't even know that licorice had flour in it. When considering a value-add for flour, you don't think of licorice."

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Neil was immediately captured by the idea of making licorice. Not only was it a product that tastes good and is good for you, he liked the ironic twist of making 'organic' confectionary. "It's almost a contradiction in terms and I love that," he said. "We make licorice from wheat and spelt."

Plus, it had a few big benefits. "No one in the southern hemisphere was making organic licorice. As far as we know, we are the only ones to make it out of spelt. Spelt is a lower allergy food and a lot higher in nutrition," Neil explained.

Neil recognized the other benefits of licorice; it has a good shelflife and there was the ability to establish an export market without a lot of competition. Apart from Green Grove Organics, organic licorice is still only made in Finland and Italy.

Green Grove Organics export their product around the world, with significant markets in the United States, South Africa and New Zealand. The wholly organic farm and mill also produces wholemeal, rye and rice flours and breakfast cereals, along with licorice.

"I love looking at trends. The trend with people has been to go back to traditional foods and confectionary. There's been a big resurgence of old fashioned lollies," Neil said.

Over ten years, Green Grove Organics has grown the business in stages and used



Neil Druce outside the Green Grove licorice factory which was built inside an historic flour mill. (This photo is seen on the front cover of the local White Pages for the Junee region.)

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sub-contractors to ease their way into where they are today. At first, there was a Sydney contractor who made the licorice from the Druce’s organic spelt, wheat and traditional recipe. The task of selling their first batch of organic licorice involved a memorable drive to Melbourne, where Neil sold stock out of his van in small towns along the way. Very quickly the first batch of 400 kilograms was sold and more orders placed.

Eventually, the opportunity arose for Neil to buy the licorice making equipment and install it in the historic building he made his Junee factory. By October 2001 their first batch of licorice making was filmed by SBS television and exporting began.

Next came the logical decision to coat the licorice in organic chocolate. After all, one thing better than licorice alone is chocolate covered licorice. Again, a contractor was used for the initial phase of chocolate coating the Green Grove product. However, by 2003 the company bought its own second-hand chocolate factory and moved it to become part of the factory at Junee. All of the chocolate used is certified organic and comes from Europe.

“We now coat anything organic we can find,” says Neil. The confectionary line has expanded to include sun muscats, macadamias, almonds, sun-dried cherries, freeze dried strawberries and more. They

source most of their nuts and fruits from certified organic Australian growers.

But the other stroke of brilliance in the Green Grove Organics story is their brave move to add further value to their products via tourism. Not only is their organic licorice for sale, seeing a chocolate factory in action pulls the tourists off the road and daily tours run as part of the Green Grove Organics operation.

From a modest start in 1998 with a partnership that went bust, Green Grove Organics has become a thriving tourist attraction boasting 85,000 visitors a year. And those figures are even more astounding when you consider that the factory is in Junee, about 40 kilometres from Wagga Wagga in Western NSW and somewhat off the regular tourist trail.

“I believe the baby boomers are driving a big tourist market in Australia. We started in a town that had visitation of 6,000 people per year and we’ve brought it up to 85,000. We’ve done the hard yards I believe.”

The factory has the drawback of being built inside an historic flour mill. Even before Neil saw the then derelict historic mill, he knew it would be perfect for his vision.

“I heard about the mill before I saw it and I thought ‘I’d love that building...’. For me, I didn’t see all the broken windows and filth. I saw what I thought I could make

it into. Now, when I see the pictures (prior to renovation) I think I must have been a bit crazy.”

But no one is calling Neil Druce crazy now. “It’s perfect business to be manufacturing onsite and selling onsite at retail. That’s perfect business to be able to sell to your customer. You don’t have difficulty with payment terms, no transport costs and no spoilage because a lot of spoilage happens in transport, especially with chocolate,” Neil says.

The factory is open 7 days a week, charging a small entry fee per person. Plus, there is an onsite café and retail store for customers to buy the products they’ve just seen made on the production line.

“We do tours everyday and we talk about organics. We present what we’ve done and why we like it. But it’s got to be fun. It’s not to knock people on the head with a message of ‘we’re doing it the right way and the other way is wrong’. Instead we say ‘it’s a way of doing things and we like it.’ It’s all entertainment and not what information tourists are after.”

“Tourism is all about people who have life and passion. So, anybody that is in the organic industry who is passionate and enjoys people is a long way down the track to having a good tourist venue. They’ll have something quite different and entertaining because they are organic.”

It’s no surprise to find that Neil Druce has further plans for growth in the near future.

“I’m looking at starting up at least one more chocolate factory. I won’t say where. I really want to do another one and it could become bigger than this one. I’m looking at 150,000 tourists a year, hopefully within 18 months.”

Plus, they are expanding their use of the Internet, with a growth in online sales via their website, www.greengroveorganics.com.au.

If you are seeking inspiration into ways of adding value to your organic product or business, Neil has some advice.

“Sometimes we need to abandon all our secure positions in life and step out and do something different.” He should know. <<<>>>