

Business profile:

BOP Coffee

By DOM O'BRIEN

In *AOJ*, we often look to a well-established organic business as an example of success.

In this edition, however, we look at a relatively new enterprise, both in terms of its establishment and its involvement in organics.

In fact it is so new to organics that the property is still in conversion, achieving that status in September 2005. But already being organic is making a positive difference to production, and the company has recently won awards for its quality.

The business is BOP Coffee, a grower and processor in the hills of the Byron Bay hinterland on the far north coast of New South Wales. If you're already jealous of the location, join the queue. It's one of the most beautiful regions on the east coast of Australia, and a relatively good climate for growing coffee.

THE PROPERTY

Margaret McNeil and Steve Myers bought the 12 hectare property in 1999.

It was in a sorry state at the time, overgrown with Camphor Laurel, Lantana, and a range of other exotic pest species. Early 2000 saw major work begin on the property, starting with clearing the weeds and moving on to major infrastructure work such as a road, a water-course diversion, dams, swales, and rainforest plantings.

By mid-2000 the couple bought 7,000 K7 variety coffee sprouts to on-grow in the nursery, and by early 2001 they were putting the seedlings in the ground.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. Heavy nutrient needs, lack of rain, and competition from thick grasses and weeds made it difficult to establish the crop. The implementation of organic systems helped to overcome this, and also fitted in with their philosophical outlook on supporting the environment.

BECOMING ORGANIC

In 2000 Margaret and Steve undertook an organic farming course at Wollongbar TAFE, a course taught by Dave Forrest. They reduced the number of trees to 4,000 – a more manageable number for selective hand-picking of the best ripe coffee berries.

In 2004, they commenced the organic certification process with ACO, placing a heavy emphasis on organic matter and microbial development within the soil. They also began planting shade trees among the rows to help develop and manage 'natural' micro-climate conditions.

During 2005 they began to see the benefits of the organic approach, with the coffee trees showing resilience to high temperatures and low rainfall (conditions not conducive to coffee production).

Then in September 2005 the farm achieved 'in-conversion' status with ACO.



THE RESULTS

Although it has been a steep learning curve, the results speak for themselves. At the Sydney Royal Show 2006, BOP Coffee entered products from the farm in two classes in the Fine Foods Coffee Competition.

In *Class 3: Plunger Coffee (Small Commercial Class)* – with 28 entrants who could blend coffee from any national and/or international source – BOP Coffee won the bronze medal.

In *Class 5: Plunger Coffee (100% single origin-Small Commercial Class)* – with 30 entrants who could source coffee from any single national or international source – they won the silver medal.

THE PRODUCTS

The K7 Arabica bean is an east African variety that is lower in caffeine than some other varieties. The company achieves variety in its blends by combining beans picked at different stages in the maturity cycle and using a variety of roasting procedures.

A range of espresso and plunger packages is available in whole bean or ground, in 70g, 250g, 500g, 1 kilogram sizes, and larger orders can be accommodated. Steve says that plunger is the most highly demanded variety.

At the present time all coffee sold under the BOP Coffee brand is grown on the property and the specialised art of roasting is done at another location nearby.

DISTRIBUTION

BOP Coffee is working to establish a wholesale presence in capital city organic outlets, and is currently in discussions regarding placement in a Hong Kong natural foods outlet.

MARKETING

Marketing is mainly focused on developing the brand name in the market-place.

The approach at the moment is to generate public relations, such as promoting the organic approach through the media.

Margaret and Steve are also promoting their awards from



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1. **Drying racks – Sun-drying of coffee beans adds to the quality of the final product.**
2. **Coffee fruit – Ripening coffee fruit on the BOP Coffee property.**
3. **BOP Coffee retail packs.**

the Sydney Royal Show, and placing branded packaging into retail outlets. As well, a new web site is planned, offering online sales and marketing opportunities.

THE HOUSE

In 2003 Steve and Margaret built a new house in accordance with their focus on sustainability.

Designed by Margaret, it was inspired by Glenn Murcutt's 'Australian vernacular' architecture, and is completely reliant on solar power. The house has a 100,000 litre rainwater tank, while the farm is serviced by four dams, two of which are spring fed.

Waste is managed on the farm through solid waste composting, which is subsequently used as nutritional input for coffee plants. The coffee processing is largely dry, and the small volume of liquid waste is used to irrigate a grass paddock.

ABOUT THE BUSINESS AND FARM

Casual labour is employed from time to time, particularly if the coffee harvest experiences a greater than expected onset of bean maturity. But as a rule, most of the hard yakka on the farm is done by Margaret and Steve.

For Margaret, the switch to organics was a break with tradition as three generations of her family have farmed conventionally before her. For Steve, simply farming is a break with tradition – he's a first time farmer!

But while they come from very different backgrounds, they both agree that organic production methods appear to be having a significant positive effect on their operation.

They explain that while it is difficult to quantify the influence of organic production methods on coffee quality, a number of observations are made:



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- the trees have so far provided a consistent level of bean production, whereas many coffee farms experience a 'feast and famine' cycle.
- the coffee trees remain relatively healthy during periods of climatic stress.
- the coffee red berries (before hand-picking) are relatively large, uniform in size and high in sugar content.
- sun-drying of processed beans helps in the development of colour, depth and longevity of the coffee crema.
- when roasted, the bean exhibits a number of positive characteristics, such as balanced acidity and sweetness, a 'nutty' flavour, and a pleasant, lingering aftertaste.

Steve and Margaret give a heartfelt account of their experience in converting to organics: "The process of organic conversion is both a rewarding and challenging experience.

"Rewarding in the sense that we have made a contribution to the on-going sustainability and good-health of our farm, and by default, the broader environment.

"Challenging in the sense that it required not only a major change to our farming practices, but also a rethink on how we frame our basic understandings of how 'things' work.

"Attempting to emulate nature requires an emphasis on 'workable disorder' rather than 'stable order'; on the promotion of diversity rather singularity; and an acceptance of the on-going renewal of process rather than the finality of some 'successful' result.

"Converting our farm to an organic systems approach through BFA mentoring and monitoring has been a profound watershed moment in our lives."

That deserves a cuppa. ■

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