

First organic achachairú fruit produced in North Queensland

By JAIME NEWBORN

THROWING EVERYTHING towards the organic production of a fruit few people have heard of isn't something the average producer would necessarily opt for.

But Philip Reitano and wife Angela have taken up the challenge with an exotic tropical fruit, the achachairú (*a-cha-chai-roo*). True pioneers, they have integrated the fruit – which originated in Amazonian forest in Bolivia – with their certified organic banana plantation and will harvest Australia's first organically grown achachairú crop in the next 12-18 months.

"We are very excited – the achachairú is something genuinely new for the organic industry," says Phillip.

"We've been (ACO) certified organic banana growers near Innisfail (Queensland) for around six years, and when we were told about the achachairú we thought 'We're really onto something here'.

"This is a fruit that's been growing un-tainted in virgin forest and has not been exposed to selective breeding. To my mind that makes it perfect for the organic market."

The achachairú – a relative of the mangosteen – is a small orange fruit with

a protective casing which can be 'popped' open to reveal white flesh. Phillip says the variety that will be marketed in Australia is a 'one seed species' and that around 90% of the fruit can be used, including the skin.

Reportedly, the fruit has a refreshing taste described as simultaneously tart and sweet.

The Reitanos first looked into their achachairú opportunities five years ago.



Phil Reitano grows Australia's first organic achachairú on his property near Innisfail, Queensland.

"We'd heard about the fruit from a friend who'd been travelling in South America. We realised there was significant potential for it to grow in similarly tropical conditions in Australia and that there was an un-explored market in terms of value-adding and processing," says Phillip.

With limited knowledge and no expert advice available, the Reitanos learnt what was best for the crop through trial and error. "We'd grown things like pomellos and

rambutans in the past but this was quite new," says Phillip.

"We're working with about 1100 trees which have been integrated with our banana crop to provide the kind of semi-shade conditions that would be experienced in the outskirts of a native forest.

"Our farm in North Queensland has relatively similar geographical conditions to Bolivia. We do tend to get a bit more rain and so far this has been to our advantage. Good rainfall creates nice new growth which we can use in mulching and composting at little cost."

The Reitanos have developed the achachairú trees with the same organic practices utilised on their banana crop. "This includes composting, mulching from mown grass and the use of organic inputs. We use pyrethrum as a last resort for insect control but we haven't had any major insect or disease problems as yet," says Phillip.

"We also carefully control the ground cover. When we turned organic I started growing large areas of pinto peanut (a low-growing, perennial legume) like it was going out of fashion and that has really strengthened the land."

He says the achachairú trees have so far proven hardy in these conditions. "The species do not rely

on chemical support traditionally. I finished planting our trees in January 2006 and in March 2006 we were dealt a very serious cyclone (Cyclone Larry). All the trees survived apart from a dozen or so – bare of leaves, but they survived."

Phillip says he puts this down to the silicon levels and health of his soil "Since converting to organic, we have just on 5% organic matter in our soil and 0.75% carbon which is fantastic. It means we have

increased our topsoil and reduced erosion.

"In my past as a conventional farmer we used to lose huge amounts of topsoil in heavy rain and our rivers ran brown – now there is no longer dirty water in our paddocks."

He says while being excited at the thought of the achachairú's harvest he does not expect a huge quantity of fruit in the first year.

"After the initial year we should break through. Typically, achachairú trees are heavy bearers and in Bolivia trees can produce up to 2000kg of fruit when they're 10-15 years old."

He says one of the things consumers and manufacturers are expected to love about the fruit is its variety of uses.

"Achachairú skins can be infused by soaking them in water and the infusion can then be used in anything from tea and iced tea to flavour in yoghurt and ice-cream, as a syrup or as a salad dressing – it's got fantastic potential from a value-adding perspective."

He says when the skin is from an organic fruit it can be used freely without the concern of chemical residues.

Phillip says he will be interested to see the reaction of retailers and wholesalers to the fruit.

"We already have interested wholesalers on the east coast. It is a new concept but it's one we think will work. When produced organically the fruit is environmentally sustainable, is high in nutrients and has a unique flavour. At the moment we're just trying to let people know it's coming."

Phillip says while the venture has been time-consuming he remains optimistic and focused for the years ahead.

"There is always criticism when you try something new. Since I became an organic farmer there have been days that have been hard but I would never turn back. Farming with chemicals is not my choice of lifestyle."

"I now have a clean and healthy environment for my family to grow up in and we are thrilled to be introducing an organic achachairú to the Australian market." 🌱

Contact Phillip Reitano, phone: (07) 4063 3906, email: reitano5@aapt.net.au.



Tropical treat

A TROPICAL FRUIT NATIVE TO the Amazonian rainforests of Bolivia, the achachairú is a relative of the mangosteen.

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When made into a drink, a traditional medicinal use of the achachairú has been to help suppress hunger.

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