

Kapiris Bros: Family horticulture operation takes a national stand

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Boxed up: Kapiris Bros managing director Harry Kapiris runs the family business.

GOOGLE Kapiris Bros and for many years the only search result was about Peter Kapiris and his serious drag racing accident in 2012.

“About four years before that he was nearly burnt alive,” recalled older brother Harry Kapiris, adding their family horticulture business Kapiris Bros sponsors Peter’s car.

“It’s his passion and we support him. We believe the family that plays together stays together.”

But the problem was the Kapiris Bros brand was becoming better known for car racing than horticulture, so the company has worked hard in recent years to highlight its successes publicly in order to bump young Peter from search engines.

“We’ve done a lot of work, even with the likes of MasterChef contestants, to focus on the business and the work we’ve been doing, so we now come up first in any internet search.”

Since it was started by three Greek brothers on a farm at Two Wells in South Australia in 1950, the company has grown to be a major player in the horticulture market, selling 25,000 tonnes of tomatoes annually, and 3600 tonnes of capsicum.

In 1958 John moved from South Australia to Melbourne to establish a wholesale market and since 1986 his five children have run the business, including Harry as managing director, Peter as operations manager and Con overseeing the Two Wells farm; with the third generation also now working in the business, and a permanent staff of about 120.

Kapiris Bros’ Two Wells Farm is now 80ha, with 25ha of plastic and 5ha of shade cloth greenhouses, growing three million kilograms of tomatoes annually, harvested from October to June.

An on-farm packing facility operates a two lane colour vision grader delivering up to 26 grading drops and processes about 3000 x 10kg cartons of tomatoes per day, branded as SA Pride.

The packing facility also provides local growers a packing service for their produce.

In addition, the company has joint partnership farms, each of which has their own packing and distribution shed.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

IN THE Bowen region of Queensland, they have a 984ha partnership with the Eatough family, producing seven million kg of field-grown tomatoes, harvested from June to November, branded as Queensland Pride.

In Tasmania, Kapiris Bros has a partnership with the Joubert family, growing red, green and yellow capsicums in 4ha of glasshouse from October to June, yielding 32kg/square metre, branded as Tassie Pride.

And in addition to these joint partnerships, much of the business involves onselling tomatoes, capsicums, honeydew and rockmelon for 44 farmers around Australia, totalling 17,300 tonnes (15,000 tonnes for tomatoes and 2300 tonnes for capsicums).

Harry said since 1958, when his father first came to Melbourne, onselling has been part of the company profile.

“Even when my father and uncle first started selling our tomatoes into Melbourne from South Australia other growers began selling their product through us,” he said. “That’s how Kapiris Bros became wholesalers.”

These days all products are marketed and sold through the company's Melbourne headquarters, with up to 50 per cent sold to the major supermarkets around Australia (including Aldi in Victoria), about 30 per cent through Melbourne wholesale market (where Kapiris has two large stores), and the remainder sold to food services, including Hungry Jacks nationally and Subway in Victoria and Tasmania.

With Melbourne as the headquarters for the company, Harry said it was looking to buy a joint-venture farm in Victoria.



Field of dreams: Clayton Eatough at the Kapiris Bros' Queensland property.

TECH HEADS

FOR now, Melbourne serves as the hub with a 4200 square metre distribution centre opened two years ago, with latest technology packing machines, including flow wrap, bags, pillow packs, packs, trays and punnets.

Director of sales and marketing Steve Tsakoumakis said given the national spread of the company and the diverse production methods, Kapiris Bros was rolling out an internal intranet system through all farms, with daily upload of all business details, from plantings to harvest, packing, and dispatch.

“It allows full traceability,” Steve said.

“The system is allowing us to be proactive in communicating with customers. Every week now we send out a report highlighting any issues, which ensures a good partnership.”

It's a valuable tool given the variation in production.

In South Australia, high-yielding, disease-resistant tomato varieties are grown under either plastic or shade cloth in hydroponic systems with high density plantings.

Greenhouses capture rainwater, which is filtered through a reverse osmosis system into a holding pond, which is then fed into an irrigation system for fertigation, which supplies the vast majority of water needs.

In South Australia, about five years ago the company also instigated integrated pest management systems — now rolled out across all their farms — introducing beneficial biological controls and reducing chemical inputs substantially.

“It just made sense, economically and environmentally,” Harry said.

“Every year we'd be paying more and more for chemicals, which were getting stronger and stronger. You've got to consider the environment and the customer doesn't want chemicals in their food.”

Harry added that IPM was easier in enclosed growing systems and had been more challenging in Queensland, which has field-grown, trellised tomatoes.

He said the crop's health was maintained in Queensland through field rotation, growing one year and resting fields for the following four years, when cover crops of mung beans and sorghum are grown.

PLASTIC FANTASTIC

IN addition plastic is laid in rows to maintain moisture and reduce weeds, alongside irrigation tape.

The Queensland property has a 3500 megalitre dam (“big enough to water ski on”), which provides all water requirements, “as we've found freshwater makes a better, healthier plant compared to bore water”.

On both the South Australian and Queensland properties, Kapiris Bros each year runs research and development trials of new tomato varieties — working with companies such as Monsanto, Seminis and Rijk-Zwann — to find seeds that work best in specific locations.

Harry added that unfortunately this year's Queensland yield dropped to 5.5 million kg (from the usual 7 million kg) because Cyclone Debbie wiped up to six weeks of production.

The Tassie Pride business has capsicums grown in glasshouses designed on a recirculating hydroponic Controlled Environment Agriculture system, using cocoa peat coir.

The glasshouse controls the temperature, humidity and light levels, with the CEA system ensuring no water is lost to evaporation, while it uses a fraction of the minerals required for outdoor crops.

At the age of 61, Harry said he'd seen "massive changes" in the industry from the time his father and uncles started the business.

"Thirty years ago we'd truck a load of tomatoes on to the wholesale floor and sell them. There was no internet or technology. You met everyone.

"These days it's more clinical. You don't see the buyers as much and it's all done via technology. Sometimes I think I'm getting too old for the game."