

AvoFresh presses ahead

Story and photographs by Lesley Board

Avocado growers who supplied fruit to AvoFresh this season will benefit from Seeka's investment in an oil processing plant at their Katikati facility where the AvoFresh crop is packed.

"We took the step as a direct result of asking our growers how we could improve our services to them," said Paul Robertson, manager for AvoFresh.

"One key message was that they wanted an improved return from their oil grade fruit, or the opportunity to have oil produced."

Paul said the AvoFresh oil press complemented the package deal to obtain the best possible return for their growers.

"We not only had to source the machinery, develop and fine-tune our processes, but also ensure all food safety requirements were met. Our growers will receive payment for their oil grade fruit from profit margins."

He says it's been a lower volume season with industry-wide export packouts averaging 63% and some Avofresh growers achieving well in excess of that.

Selling oil remains an option

"Because our overall focus remains assisting growers to produce quality export fruit, there hasn't been a huge volume of oil grade fruit available to us this season. The option of bottling and selling our own oil in future is under discussion and we remain committed to maximising grower returns."

Terry Russell, Seeka's inventory manager for kiwifruit at Katikati and assistant site manager, has been closely involved with the oil operation from the start. The machine purchased from the South Island was originally used for olives and is an Italian-made Enorossi.

"The project was the brainchild of Seeka's CEO Michael Franks who wanted to extract extra income for our avocado growers. This season we have already sold some of the oil to Village Press in Hawke's Bay. Our growers have taken quite an interest in the venture and they can purchase oil for their own use at cost."

From the coolstore, the avocados are first fed into the de-seeder to remove the skin and seed and the resulting pulp is then pushed through a sieve.

"At that stage the paste looks a bit like guacamole. The pulp is then feed into a three-tank malaxator which kneads and mollifies the pulp with a large rotating helix and prevents it from oxidising."

The malaxator is surrounded by a water jacket that warms the pulp and helps the oil separation process.

"We can have 250 to 260kg of paste in each chamber at a time and it stays there for around an hour. At that stage we can monitor the paste, and depending on the

Terry with the finished product – extra virgin avocado oil bottled for AvoFresh under the Premier Edition label.





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The centrifuge machine.

oil content, adjust the process to ensure we get a good oil sheen showing before the pulp is pumped to the centrifuge. The centrifuge spins the oil out through a feeder at the bottom while the water and ‘cake’ go off in another direction”

Once the oil has been extracted it is then “polished” before being stored in three large 1,200 litre vats that are purged with nitrogen for good keeping. From here the oil is sent for bottling. Terry expects to process around 20,000 tray equivalents of avocados for oil by the end of the season.

Adaptations

“We have made quite a few adaptations such as increasing the size of the sieve screen on the de-seeder, adding an extra tank to the malaxator to give us more capacity and rebalancing the centrifuge. If you want to infuse the oil with flavours such as lemon or lime that has to be done while the pulp is in the malaxator but at present we are producing just the pure oil.”

Seeka cadet Greg Brown is in charge of the machine when it’s running, which can be anything from three to five days a week depending on the supply of fruit. 🌿



From left:

Terry Russell with the de-seeder originally designed for olives.

Terry and Greg Brown (left) check out the malaxator tanks before the next batch goes through.

Battler for growers recognised

By Lesley Board

Hugh Moore has been called many things during his 40 feisty years in industry politics – not all of them complimentary. But it's only since the New Year's Honours List was announced that he's been able to call himself Hugh Moore QSM.

The award to the Bay of Plenty grower, packer and industry leader is for services to horticulture. Though the title makes him grin, he does admit to being "quite chuffed".

In 2007 he stood down as chairman of both the Avocado Industry Council and the Avocado Growers Association and was made a life member of AGA. He received the industry's Bledisloe Cup in 2008 and was made a life member of Horticulture New Zealand in 2009 – all of which suggest he might be about to retire from the demands and frustrations of industry politics.



Hugh Moore's office is stacked with files. He believes in the value of systems including a paper trail and knows how to instantly find items filed 10 to 20 years ago.

Retains diverse interests

Not so, says this energetic 62-year-old who with his wife Dorothy owns several orchards (both kiwifruit and avocados), runs an avocado packhouse and is closely involved with the management of a family dairy farm – all of which add up to a very complex and demanding business with 14 permanent staff.

On top of all that Hugh is a trustee of both Team Avocado and Hume Pack-N-Cool, has recently been appointed to the board of the Horticulture Export Authority (HEA), is still on several avocado industry committees and chairs the one for grade standards that he has always considered to be of supreme importance. He was in the thick of the action when grade standards were set for the kiwifruit industry and is proud to have modelled avocado standards on those.

Likes to have his say

"Being involved for so long with industry politics has come at a cost but I'm a person who likes to have his say – you can only change things for the better by getting involved."

It all began in the mid-70s with the formation of the Bay of Plenty-based Private Packers Association. At that time Hugh and Dorothy ran one of just two kiwifruit packhouses in Katikati and like other small operators they opposed the "take-over" nature of Bay of Plenty Fruitpackers.

"Fruitpackers had a lot of dominance over MAF which then handled all quality control and they wanted all kiwifruit to be inspected at their premises or at point of coolstore. Our association was not anti-co-op but we had experienced members like the Bayliss and Baldwin families on board who were already packing better quality lines than Fruitpackers, so we fought for a say and a strength in this new industry."

"Their finest hour"

It was the huge battle, fought and won in 1988, to set up the Kiwifruit Marketing Board and a single desk industry, that Hugh regards as the greatest achievement of his career. He describes the way in which growers united against commercial interests as the industry's "finest hour".

"I was on the Kiwifruit Sector Committee then and president of Katikati Fruitgrowers Association that was politically very strong. I flew all around the country talking with growers to ensure they had the facts and understood what was at stake – they were being fed so much misinformation by some of the postharvest sector who had obvious vested interests.

"It wasn't that the various exporters couldn't sell our fruit well, the problem was they couldn't control fruit quality or manage the postharvest industry – so much fruit was being wasted offshore it took away all the profit."

Hugh's amazing memory for dates, events and debates is legendary. He can immediately put his hand on newspaper clippings from 1993 when supporters of Integrated Kiwifruit Services Ltd (the anti-single desk lobby), were asking growers if they could survive on 40c a tray! And he chuckles at an advertisement revealing those members of the postharvest sector who then backed IKS.

Current challenge

"The current challenge from Turners & Growers to our single desk status is the same thing all over again – commercial interests wanting to take control for their own gain. I believe Zespri is doing an excellent job. Every large organisation will have some warts and there will always be areas for criticism. But at the end of the day the benefits of single desk far outweigh any minor negatives."

Hugh says his outspoken manner has sometimes offended but he values the independence that allows him to voice his opinion without restraint.

"As my own boss, not working for any entity or organisation, I've been able to speak out frankly without fear of losing my job. And though I'm both a grower and packer of fruit I've never had a problem differentiating between the two roles – when I represent growers my grower's hat is firmly in place."

Surprisingly, Hugh remembers being extremely shy during the years when he trained as a fitter and welder, studied engineering and spent hours behind a drafting desk. But having entered the cut and thrust of industry politics he had the fortunate knack of being able to sleep on a problem – no tossing and turning after heated debate.

"I don't get wound up about things; I just deal with them. If growers ask you to do a job then you just get on with it – that's my philosophy."

Growers did ask him to represent them when NZKGI was formed – he was the highest polling candidate at the first election.

"At a later election I was chucked off – probably because I was a bit noisy and I wasn't connected to other entities. Later I was asked to go back on, but by then was too involved with the avocado industry. In my opinion NZKGI does a very good job for today's growers but its constitution is flawed in that growers are not actually members so can't change it – only the executive can do that."

If Hugh has any regrets about his contribution to horticulture it is not having been elected to the Kiwifruit Authority or the Kiwifruit Marketing Board – he was a candidate three times.

'I believe every Green grower who has the area available should switch some of their orchard to one of the new varieties.'

Suppliers should not control revenue stream

"I believe the KMB got it wrong when setting up the supplier entity system. We need suppliers but they should never have been allowed to control the revenue stream."

Hugh is not about to leave the industry or to stop his contribution but he's pleased to see younger growers prepared to step up into leadership roles.

"The average grower is very busy just making a living with not a lot of time to read or even understand some of the complex postharvest or commercial issues. They need people with energy and ability to represent their interests. The fruit loss debacle of about three years ago came down to bad postharvest practice and that same bad practice has cost growers on three other occasions."

Smoke and mirrors

"The postharvest industry is all about 'smoke and mirrors' and pools are still being manipulated. Growers need to understand that and to choose the operator they feel most comfortable with."


Asked about the future for both avocados and kiwifruit, Hugh, as always, had definite views.

"I believe every Green grower who has the area available should switch some of their orchard to one of the new varieties."

High quality avocados needed for export

With avocados he says there are too many people lobbying for Class 2 fruit to be sent offshore – the only way New Zealand growers will get maximum returns is through high quality fruit.

"The industry will eventually crack the problem of biennial bearing. People tend to grasp at possible solutions but there are complex issues to do with temperature and timing that we don't yet fully understand."

"We all have to whittle away at the puzzle – scientists will answer some of our questions but will never give us a perfect recipe. I believe the big drought of 2001/2002 triggered biennial cropping in the Bay and Mother Nature may well jerk us out of it again." 

Katikati festival rated most successful

Story and photographs by Lesley Board

Avocado cheesecake is rare enough, but a savoury one made with a macadamia base and topped with grated Mount Eliza cheese?

Kerry Guy's unusual entry in the cheesecake contest at last month's Katikati Avocado, Food & Wine festival was the judges' favourite and a hit with festival goers who were happy to pay for a sample of all the entries on display. Kerry's cheesecake was accompanied by lime-cured kingfish tartare, capsicum and onion salsa, lemon avocado aioli and sweet chilli sauce served with home-made crusty bread.

"It was unusual but very, very tasty and beautifully presented," said judge Inez Cooper.

The cheesecake and guacamole contests were a new feature of the festival and along with cooking demonstrations featuring

From top:

Jan and Garry Carpenter (Tauranga) take time out for an avocado treat.

Cheesecake judges Marg Rutherford (left) with the winning entry and Inez Cooper.



- 2 ripe Hass avocados
- 2 Tbsp Meyer lemon juice
- 1 medium red onion
- 1 red cayenne chilli, de-seeded and finely chopped
- 1 large Beef Steak tomato, skinned, de-seeded and finely chopped
- 1 large garlic clove, crushed with mortar and pestle
- Basil leaves fresh, enough to make 1 Tbsp when crushed with mortar and pestle
- Salt and pepper to taste.

avocados, were a popular draw card. Four brave finalists lined up to make big bowls of their favourite guacamole recipe amid plenty of good-natured heckling and advice from the crowd. The winning mix, put together by Jane Munro (see box and photo above).

Public able to taste

Chefs Peter Blakeway (Deli on Devonport) and Stacey McLean (Twickenham Restaurant) were the official guacamole judges but the public had the chance to taste and decide which was their favourite as well. The judges and the public were in total agreement – Jane received a \$100 voucher from Twickenham and two \$50 vouchers from Plenti Cookschool (run by Peter Blakeway).

Organisers of the festival, held for the seventh consecutive year, rated it one of their best yet, though numbers were down about 10% on last year when around 2,000 attended.

“I think that’s a good result in the current economic climate and considering we raised the entry fee for the first time in six years,” said David Crispin, a spokesman for the organisers, Katikati Pakeke Lions. “The weather was great and the crowds were happy with the music, food and wine on offer.

“We are hoping that members of the avocado industry will take control of the avocado side of the festival and build it up even more.”

Many local organisations and individuals contributed to the day and this year the profit goes to help with maintenance of Aongatete Lodge, a popular local venue for many school groups, youth and other organisations. 🌿

Winner Jane Munro and Peter Nicholas, intent on mixing their favourite guacamole.

