

Entrepreneur

Bagging a fresh and healthy idea

Committed vegetarian and entrepreneur Ashley Berrysmith is full of ideas about packaging fresh vegetables in ways that benefit consumers. Eating healthy is proving good business with his company NZ Fresh Cuts, now turning over around \$25 million a year. Berrysmith started out in 1990 under the trade name Sun Sprout, trying to turn bean sprouts into a mainstream supermarket product. The range now includes fresh sprouts, salad greens, vegetable mixes and baby peeled carrots and Berrysmith has plans for a whole lot more under development. With 180 staff, NZ Fresh Cuts also exports to Hong Kong and Singapore.



Ashley Berrysmith, founder of NZ Fresh Cuts

read his book *Every Bastard Says No*. I could have probably written that book as well. He went through a hard road starting up where no-one believed in his idea and thought vodka from New Zealand was a crazy idea. His story is exactly what happened to me when I was starting out with the sprouts.

What do you do to attract and retain staff?

I buy them into the dream. It's the passion that goes right through the company, so it's about our philosophy. We were the first to be carbon zero in our business and that's not about doing it for marketing or being trendy, we did it because I wanted to

minimise our carbon footprint which is all part of my personal philosophy on sustainability.

How do you sustain company growth?

Never-ending innovative ideas. Describe a mistake you learnt from in business?

I made a huge mistake 1½ years ago when I bought a similar business to us, Fresh Appeal, in the South Island. I didn't look deeply enough into it and have lost millions on it. I would say go and do your homework well before getting too excited about an idea because it was the most expensive mistake I have made.

We're working on turning it around, and we're picking up demand.

Describe your best triumph?

Getting the bag salad business into Progressive supermarkets in the early days in 2000. It meant creating a category for fresh salads at a time when we had little money and had to rent farms and got into a huge amount of debt on a punt. But we believed in the dream and Progressive did not say no. They said a lot of maybes before saying yes.

What are your business and personal goals?

My business and personal goals go hand in hand. I want us to become a more sustainable business, not because it's trendy, but because that's what I want to be remembered for. On

a personal note, I've set up a charitable foundation, the Berrysmith Foundation, to fund ways of growing foods more sustainably for the world. One of our first ideas is aquaponics, where we've combined a fish farm with growing hydroponic lettuces. It's a closed circuit system where we're using the waste product of one to feed the other. We've spent half a million dollars so far, setting it up in Nelson on a trial basis, and it's producing amazing results.

How do you balance worklife and home?

That's a difficult one. I work and then at home I do foundation work, which takes a lot of my time, particularly the trial down in Nelson.

It's my hobby and interest so I live and breathe it.

Do you have any tips for budding entrepreneurs?

Never give up on your dream. My rule is if you dream about it for three weeks in a row, you have to stick at it. If you only dream about it for one night and wake up the next day you might think it's a silly idea, but after three weeks you have to take that great idea and go and do it. I call it the 21-day challenge. **FIONA ROTHERHAM**

What was your first entrepreneurial act?

I've always been a vegetarian and I wanted to get people eating more healthily by turning hippy food [bean sprouts] into a mainstream supermarket product. We packaged the bean sprouts to show they were not just healthy, but how they could make your meals more interesting.

What makes someone an entrepreneur?

Thinking outside the square and allowing nothing to stop you.

What have been the biggest obstacles in running your own business?

People who say no. People who don't get the vision and who try to intellectualise too much. There's always someone who'll say "no we

can't do it, it's too costly or there are production constraints", but I say "how can we overcome that and turn my idea into a reality?"

What is your company's unique selling proposition?

It's delivering your greens in a fun and convenient way and inventing bag salads. There were already salads in bowls, but I had the bright idea of making it easier to fit them in the fridge and they have caught on offshore.

What's your next big idea?

We're looking at going into semi-cooked food and we're playing around with the idea of what people can eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Who do you admire in business and why?

Geoff Ross, because I have just

 **Ernst & Young
Entrepreneur Of The Year®**
2007 New Zealand
award winner