



Radicchio in greenhouse

Kombi van to this

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New Zealand Fresh Cuts (NZFC) are widely regarded as pioneers in the New Zealand fresh cut industry. They have driven innovations in the marketplace for over 15 years, and, in 1990, established sprouts as a mainstream grocery item. This did not, however, happen overnight.

In 1979, a student graduated from Massey University with a Diploma in Vegetable Crop Production. Due to a shortage of money, he lived in a VW microbus on campus during the eight-month long course, and it was only towards the end of the course that the Vice-Chancellor found out, by which time it was rather too late to take any action.

Soon after graduating, Ashley Berrysmith borrowed \$10,000 from the bank and travelled through the United States looking at how vegetable sprouts were produced. On his return, he established "The Sprout House" to produce and market sprout seeds and beans to health food retailers.

It would be nice to think that this was a carefully organised operation, well thought out and well funded, but in fact, it was established initially on the smell of an oily rag, in the backyard of his house where the sprouting chambers were situated in an old swimming pool and the product washed in an old tub. Fortunately, at that time, GAP and HAACP was completely unknown concepts in horticulture.

The small company flourished, and in 1984, Sun Sprout Ltd was established, and the "Sprout Man" brand was introduced

as a cartoon character. The company's factory moved to a commercial site in Avondale, Takanini and finally to a site in Otahuhu, in South Auckland. In 1990, sprouts, became a mainstream product with the installing of refrigerated cabinets in Woolworths and Big Fresh supermarkets throughout New Zealand. In 1994, Sun Sprout introduced the first baby leaf salads for trials in Woolworths stores. The project failed, as New Zealand was not yet ready to switch away from traditional iceberg salads.

In 1997, the new company (called Fraishon Foods Ltd) was established to process and market baby peeled carrots, and the Sun Sprout company was sold. There was a three-year restraint on the new company producing sprouts and baby leaf. In the year 2000, the restraint expired

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and Fraibson Foods established farms to produce and market baby leaf salads throughout New Zealand. This time, it was a success. In 2005, Sun Sprout Ltd was repurchased, and has rapidly expanded and, along with New Zealand Fresh Cuts, now produces over 140 branded products throughout New Zealand, with a growing export market in South East Asia.

In 2005, a new company (New Hemisphere Ltd) was formed as a joint-venture with the South Island based company, Oil Seed Extractions Limited, to develop and market quality New Zealand hemp seed oil. A recent development of this has been the establishment of a hemp-based line of cosmetics currently being promoted in the United Kingdom.

Over the past 25 years, Ashley Berry Smith has earned a solid reputation as a pioneer in the production and processing of premium quality fresh food products. He has achieved this through the utilisation of modern processing technology and is a truly world class product in relation to both health and hygiene. The streamlining of his processing enables his salad greens to be picked, washed, packed and delivered to supermarkets throughout New Zealand within a maximum timeframe of 48 hours. Similarly, his sprout production is equally streamlined with precise computer-controlled facilities able to provide heat, lighting and nutrients as and when required in order to produce optimum growing conditions, and capable of producing thousands of kilograms of product every month. All the production is done on three major sites.

At Rangiriri in the Waikato, an 80ha farm produces baby leaf salad year round, using state-of-the-art growing and harvesting based on VitaCress salads in the United Kingdom.

At Karaka (just south of Auckland), a three-quarter hectare hydroponic greenhouse produces over 500kg per week of radicchio for addition to baby leaf salads.

The packhouse/factory near Mount Wellington in South Auckland is the nerve centre of the operation, as this is where all the produce is packaged, and is also the



Harvesting baby leaf, Rangiriri



Harvested radicchio

production site for all the different types of sprouts produced by the company.

This is where all the sprouts are grown, using equipment developed over the years by Ashley and his staff. A good example of this is the alfalfa sprouting machine which was developed as a prototype many years ago; now a battery of them operate 24/7 in a highly controlled environment.

Similarly, snow pea sprouts are grown under carefully controlled temperature

conditions in the dark until just prior to harvest.

What of the future? The move to growing radicchio in a hydroponic greenhouse may well be a signal that growing in the field has too many problems. Certainly, greenhouse production will help to overcome the problem of regulating supply during the winter months, along with the ongoing difficulty of product damage due to washing the product

to remove any soil prior to packaging.

Organic production is also another aspect of production which may warrant further examination.

Whatever the future holds, the impecunious student from Massey University has come a long way in the 25 years since graduation!

