

MEET THE MAKER

Soumelidis family on a Greek seafood odyssey

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, WAYNE HARRINGTON speaks to Great Southern Seafoods' Adam and Margaret Soumelidis about the family's long association with the fishing industry.



Wayne Harrington: Adam, you didn't necessarily start in the fishing industry in your working life did you? Tell us about your life growing up.

Adam Soumelidis: I didn't know the difference between a whiting and a snapper when I first started. I didn't know anything about the fishing industry – nothing at all. But when I was a kid in Coober Pedy – probably in about grade seven – we did a class project. There's no river, there's no ocean, you're 800 kilometres from the ocean, so you wouldn't be thinking about fishing, would you? My project that I chose back then was on the canning factory in Port Lincoln.

WH: Going back even further, how did your family come to be in Australia?

AS: We came over in November 1969. Melbourne Cup Day. In those days when you came here you had to have someone who was going to put you up and find you a job. My mother's brother was here. So I was seven years old and we came into Melbourne and my Mum, still to this day, says the story of when we come to Melbourne from Greece with the hustle and bustle of Thessaloniki and no-one was out on the streets. And Mum says this place

is locked down like a ghost town. No one was around, you know, because it was Cup Day. So that's one thing that stuck out.

WH: We hear a lot in recent times about how difficult it was for migrant families. Was that your experience?

AS: Definitely tough. My first day at school, Mum said to me, "Your cousins are going to school, so just get on the bus with them". I went from Footscray in Melbourne to Yarraville Primary School. I jumped on the bus with my cousin, jumped off the bus with my cousins. I was playing in the playground and then the bell goes for everyone to go to class and everyone disappeared. And I'm just sitting in the playground by myself, not knowing what to do. No one took me to school and enrolled me and showed me what to do, you know what I mean? And my English was not great. I had no English. And obviously some teacher must have seen some kid sitting out in the playground and came out to ask what I was doing, but I didn't know what they were saying. They found a couple of Greek kids who could speak that language a little bit and asked me who I was. Finally they just took me to some



class with kids my age. So, you know, it was pretty tough.

WH: Conversely, Margaret, your family was very much involved in the fishing industry?

MS: Yes, in Greece my grandfather was a sponge fisherman in Kalymnos. They were sponge divers but they did do fishing as well. They used to go to all the islands and sell their produce. My father had to do it really tough because he was the oldest of his family and he was the one who used to fish with my grandfather. My grandfather, at 45, had a heart attack and died and that sort of left my father to his own devices to fend for himself and look after his brothers and sisters. When my father married my mother, he was still fishing. That was his background.

WH: Obviously quite a resilient young man?

MS: He had to be because his father died very young. And then it was the responsibility of the oldest son to look after the mother and the other siblings. But when he married my mother, my grandfather on my mother's side decided to emigrate to Australia. They went to a town in South Australia called Ceduna. So we emigrated to there. My father's other siblings went to the United States, but my father decided to follow his father-in-law's footsteps and continue fishing. So this was earlier than my husband's family – the post-war period in the 1950s. The Australian Government wanted people to come to Australia and work, so that's when the Greeks, the Slavs and the Italians started coming.



■ The team in the early days at Ceduna's Harry Paul Processors. Left, Margaret and Adam Soumelidis are proud of their state-of-the-art processing facility on Barker Road in Albany.

remote, regional lifestyle. My father had left the fishing industry and went into building.

WH: So you met as a part of the Greek community in Adelaide?

AS: Yes. With mining, I didn't like that for the reason being it is a hard work and no pay unless you find something. That's not for me, I wanted a job where you can go and you actually get paid at the end of the week. So I did mechanical work for about a year and I went into the bar trade and learned about the restaurants and pubs, as you do.

MS: We're talking about 16, 17 and 18. This isn't like in our 20s, this is really young. And when you're a child of a migrant, it's not like being a 16 and 17-year-old now. I was writing cheques for my dad at 14 and 15 because English was his second language. The only reason I was allowed to work at this particular restaurant was because my uncle's wife's brothers and sisters owned it. So it was actually a family type connection. That's the only reason at 15 I was actually allowed to leave home and go and work there – because my father trusted that family that I'd be looked after. My father wouldn't just let me work anywhere. It was just hard. It was difficult back then and it was very strict. So that's where we met.

WH: How long was it before you

all ended up back in the seafood industry?

MS: After we got married an opportunity came about for my father to buy into a business in Ceduna called Harry Paul Fish Processors. And then the rest is really history. So we were just married, we were living in a unit, I was 21, and I just had my son, George. Adam was doing bar work and my father had a meeting with my sister and I. My older sister was already in part of this business. But there was an opportunity because one of the directors decided to leave. And my father said, "How do you feel if we just up and leave here and go back to Ceduna?" My first thought was, "No, no, no". We couldn't go back to very remote living. I was used to being in the city. And my father said, "Look, you know, it's a really good opportunity". Adam was about 25. So we decided, "Okay, we'll give it go".

WH: What was the broad business plan?

MS: My father said, "Look, I'll work the business for X amount of years, and then I'll hand it over. So you will have actually something to work towards". And he was a man of his word. So I think he worked for another five years.

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WH: How did you two meet?

MS: We met in Adelaide. When I was six years old, my father left Ceduna and went to Adelaide. So I grew up in a city and Adam also left Coober Pedy and went to Adelaide. You get

to a point where you want more than what you can get out of a small country town. Our parents found they needed more because I was the youngest. We all had older siblings and my father wanted more for us than a really small



WH: These agreements don't always work out so well for families, do they?

MS: No, they don't. But sometimes the young ones today don't want those opportunities and they think that everything needs to be given to them. My husband was 25, I had a small child and he worked seven days a week.

WH: And there was a lot for you to learn in a hurry, Adam?

AS: Yes, but I was willing to learn. I had to learn quick, learn the knife and get used to working seven days a week. What is it now? Nearly 40 years later? I'm still doing the same thing.

WH: After a period of all working together in Ceduna, things started moving quickly didn't it?

MS: Yes, because we then had an opportunity to buy another quarter share. So it ended up being the three brothers-in-law who owned that business, and we worked successfully together for about 17 years. But we came to a point when the children were teenagers that we just outgrew Ceduna, even though it's still the family home and we love it. A lot of our produce used to actually come from here. We used to have a truck that came through Albany and Esperance every fortnight to collect all the fish.

WH: So it was that connection that brought you here?

MS: Yes, that connection was why we came to Western Australia – to support the local fishing industry here in this state and leave the money in this state and the fish in this state. It used to leave the state because there was nobody doing what we did. My other brother-in-law went to Esperance, so between us all we are involved with a big strip of the coast of southern Australia.

WH: Obviously, though, it's not just a job and not just work. You must have developed a passion for this industry.

AS: If you just treat it like a job, just to get more pay, and just to make money,



■ George Soumelidis is just one of the family members working alongside Adam at Great Southern Seafoods.

you won't survive in this job, because you have to actually love it.

WH: What really excites you about this industry? What makes you go home and think, "This has been a great day?"

AS: I like it when I do a day's worth of packing and you've put some product away that someone's going to eat and going to love it. And they know that it's local. That's what excites me. It would excite me if Governments started looking after us and giving us some good news. Local fishermen are sometimes looked at like they're criminals. If they're not looked after there won't be this renewable resource for local communities to enjoy.

WH: It's interesting that we have the least popular Fisheries Minister in the history of Western Australian politics and the result of that is that recreational fishers and the commercial operators are suddenly on the same page when it comes to managing the resource out there.

AS: Definitely. I always say we need to stick together. It's a renewable resource and we don't just take it out and it's gone forever. It renews itself and that's why we have limits. We have regulations, management and research.

WH: The transition from your first premises on the Lower Denmark Road to this new facility on Barker Road was quite a difficult project, wasn't it?

MS: Yes, that wasn't easy. It was lots of hurdles and roadblocks. We had a lot of red tape from local government. We'd just come from the Eastern States and we saw lots of opportunities for progress, but we got a lot of resistance.

WH: Difficulties aside, was it exciting to start planning a state-of-the-art facility from a blank canvas?

AS: It's a little bit of an overkill because we had to satisfy local government and the community that it wasn't a dirty, disgusting fish processing factory – a

"noxious" industry. So when we first went to local government, they said that we could buy this block. Then a few weeks later they said no we couldn't and that we had to go out near Fletcher's. So we thought, "Well, we've got to leave it because that won't work". So we had to put up a really big fight and we got it through by one vote. Then they wanted to rescind the motion. So anyway, we got it over the line.

MS: I still call it the state-of-the-art fish factory because I don't actually think there's any fish factory that looks like this anywhere in Australia. I've gone to Melbourne, we've gone most of the way around Australia and had a look at fish processing so we could build this and satisfy local governments and the community that this was going to be a clean, beautiful thing.

WH: Margaret, you get very passionate when it comes to family and the sacrifices you've all made, don't you?

MS: I get really emotional because



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■ Margaret Soumelidis' father, Frazis Frazis, brought his Greek fishing heritage to Australia in the 1950s. Right, just some of the amazing fresh seafood caught locally and ready for processing at Great Southern Seafoods.



I've had to be an extremely supportive wife to support my husband, who's dedicated his life to this industry. He's been a really dedicated husband and father and has worked really hard for this industry and for his family. I get really emotional when I hear his story because I felt like I was a single parent bringing up my children because he was just committed and devoted to the work that he had to do. But I understood that. Next year we reach 40 years of marriage, which is great. And like he said, it's not all about making money. Of course, we all go to work to make money, but it's like any industry. It's like the farmers farming. Fishing is

an industry and you do become quite embedded into what that actually means for a lot of families – not only for our family, but what does that mean for a lot of fishing families. And it's lovely that we're able to support it. But the end result is the retail side and just getting our regular customers coming in and enjoying that. That's what has been the success of Great Southern Seafoods – the ability to support a local fishing industry and also the community and local businesses in being able to offer our own premium quality seafood in this state.

WH: How are plans coming along for

your proposed seafood cafe at the Albany Waterfront?

MS: We were thinking we were going to be up and running in 2024, but we're still doing some work with the geotechnical guys who want a little bit more stability with those rocks under that land, just to make sure that in 30 years' time there is no erosion. The broad vision is that I always like to promote our already established fish and chip shops and eating establishments in Albany. We're really spoiled. I always say this because I frequent a lot of our beautiful cafes

and restaurants and we do get a lot of lovely seafood. We would like to be able to provide through our own business – more of a Mediterranean-inspired seafood restaurant. Nothing like that exists in Albany. We want to do a dedicated charcoal grill, really lovely Greek salads and tasting plates. Champagne with oysters in the summertime, right on the water.

WH: How many professional fishermen have you got supplying to Great Southern Seafoods?

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AS: Probably around about seven big boats and then got a couple of hand liners.

WH: As a family you do no actual commercial fishing yourselves?

AS: We're not fishermen now. We have licences and put them on the boats to get the product through the factory.

WH: What is your general level of optimism for the future of the professional fishing industry?

AS: Well, put it this way: Who is coming into the industry? It's mainly the sons of fishermen, good operators. They come into it and get young ones involved in it. But now, there's so much red tape they have to go through with skippers' tickets and regulations and there's a lot more computer work on board that they have to do. If you're a fisherman, you're not a top person in an office, and you're not going to be that computer-literate. You probably didn't like school, and it's just not a job for everyone. Our management plan is about 100 pages thick. And then here we've got vessel

monitoring systems in place, so they know where the boat is going. We've got Marine Parks, Commonwealth zones, seine fishing exclusion zones that come in. Now the latest change that's coming in is the State Marine Parks. I think nowadays fishermen, when they hear about research they're the first ones to put their hands up because they want to have a future. They want sustainability. They want the future for their sons if they stick to fishing.

WH: Going out to sea seems a pretty tough way to earn a living.

AS: Down here on the south coast the weather can get pretty brutally out there. You have to be out in the open all the time and that can raise safety issues as well. So it's those type of things that are not encouraging people to come into the industry. If you're not already in the industry, and someone says, "I want to invest some money because I've got a couple of million dollars I want to invest in this industry", tell him to take his money and invest it somewhere else because you don't have certainty here in this industry.

WH: So where do the products that you process and package here end up?

AS: The majority would go to Victoria and the rest around here.

WH: What sort of quantities?

AS: Well put it this way: if we had the 10 pallets a month we could send 10 pallets. But we are regulated so we can't just go out and catch as much as we want. Now we've got units, we've got the time and gear restrictions, closed areas where we can't go and fish so you know you can't just go out there and just keep fishing.

WH: What types of locally-caught fish are you selling?

AS: Nannygai, pink snapper, queen snapper, groper, saddleback cod – all the main south coast species.

WH: Given one choice of a meal that you could have, featuring your own produce, what would it be?

AS: Boarfish. It's just a good size, more flavor, easy cooking. I'd just put it the pan with salt and pepper, a bit of oregano and lemon juice. That's it. But don't overcook it. You can't catch it

with a hook. You have to catch it with a net, which is why we don't see much of it come through here.

WH: That wasn't a very Greek answer. I was expecting something more like grilled octopus.

AS: I like that, too,

WH: The business is a solid contributor to the local economy?

AS: I'd like to think we make a contribution to the economy. We help some of the sports clubs here, the local fuel depot. I have bought a heap of trucks, cars and utes from the local guys and I like to support local packaging places. I think they've been good to me and I think I've been good to them.

WH: How many people are employed here?

AS: At the moment we've got about eight people. It's a family business, so eventually my vision would be for me to not retire but, you know, start taking it a little bit easy.

WH: We've your little grandson Georgio

■ Adam Soumelidis is hopeful that his family, Great Southern Seafoods and the local fishing industry can continue to provide high-quality, sustainably caught seafood for future generations.



sitting here watching us today, so what would be your wish for him and the other grandkids?

AS: I'd love to see them in the business and take it further to different markets hopefully. But I can't push them. Because what happens is when you have your kids come into a business, it actually does tie you down. If they

decided to do something else, I could quite easily say, "You know what, I've had enough. I'll sell it and retire". But when you've got two kids, they're in there and you try even harder to keep it going.

WH: Coming from a big European

family, the thought of families at home, sitting around the table and enjoying something and you had a hand in creating must give you a great lift?

AS: You know, when you asked me about what drives me and what makes you happy sometimes? When I'm not filleting I look out through the window and see old ladies coming in to buy

seafood because obviously they love it. What we and the commercial fishermen are doing is working to supply seafood to someone like that who can't go fishing. They can't get out there, but they love the local seafood. So that's our job. I think that's providing service and that's what makes me happy. **S**



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