

MEET THE MAKER

Pioneers of region's avocado industry

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine spoke to King River Avocados' Simon and Sue Keast about their work to help pioneer the industry in the Albany region.

Southerly Magazine: How long have you been here at King River?

Sue Keast: Forty years.

SM: What brought you here?

Simon Keast: I knew the farmer who was doing the subdivision. He had invited us out here to look over the place and see what was happening. This particular block attracted us, so we spoke to him and he said he'd hold it for us until the subdivision went through. That's the way it worked out.

SM: What attracted you?

Sue: The granite rocks.

Simon: And the Millbrook stream which runs right through the property. And some very good dirt which is down where we've got the orchard. It's obviously stuff that's been brought down over many, many years by the stream. It actually grows avocados very well.

SM: That would be a fairly peculiar thing for this part of the world, because not everyone would consider this area as having the very best soil in the world.

Simon: Certainly not. In fact it's commonplace that Western Australian soil is fairly poor.

SM: How long into your 40 years here did you decide avocados would be a good idea?

Simon: The plan always was to have an orchard down there. Full of the enthusiasm of youth, you plant

everything you can possibly think that would go into an orchard, and then you realise your mistakes. So, it was only a couple of years before we had pretty well picked out avocados from other trees to grow, replaced the rest of the orchard with avocado trees and basically focused on one particular product.

SM: Was it trial and error that got you there or were there other things that led to that decision?

Simon: We need to go back to our youth when Sue and I first got married. We were living in a guest house in a suburb of Nairobi and there was an enormous avocado tree there which used to deliver heaps of avocados. Five shillings for a sackful. Unbelievable. That developed our taste and our interest.

SM: Were there avocados in Australia at that point?

Simon: There would have been, but nobody knew anything about them. That was the problem.

Sue: There was an avocado grower in Torbay, so we weren't the first here.

Simon: Thirty years ago was about the time avocados started to become part of the diet of Australia. Those days it was a specialist item.

SM: How did they get a foothold?

Simon: The Avocado Association started advertising and the demand for them grew substantially.

SM: It would have been a very



■ Sue and Simon Keast have enjoyed their 40 years growing avocados in the Millbrook Valley at King River.

speculative decision then, to concentrate on avocados 30 years ago?

Simon: More of an interest – a hobby if you like.

Sue: We were both still working full-time. I was working for David Moss & Co and Simon worked for Arthur Johnson Snowball.

SM: How many trees did you put in initially?

Simon: If I recall correctly, they would come in cartons of eight. I think eight would've been our first delivery.

Subsequent to that, we were taking them in at 16s at a time. They came from Birdwood Nursery in Nambour, Queensland.

SM: What variety did you start with?

Simon: We tried all sorts of varieties to begin with. This was an area where they were grown, so it was a question of what variety was best suited. We would've experimented with about six or seven varieties. We still have four varieties: Two early varieties, Fuerte and Sharwil, our main crop is Hass and we also have a variety called Reed.



SM: In what proportions?

Simon: We have very few of the early varieties – only about seven or eight trees, but enough to whet the appetite at the Farmers Market.

SM: Just to get the season underway?

Simon: Yes, and it brings us in at October, which is fairly early for ripe avocados, in Albany. Then the main varieties are in equal proportions. There's about 60 trees of each variety.

Sue: Reed is the most popular. We get a lot of requests for Reed.

SM: Why's that?

Sue: Because they're creamier, they're bigger and they're a lovely flavour. We could sell five Reeds to one Hass.

Simon: They have a thicker skin, so they're not so inclined to blemish.

SM: Does that also make them more resistant to bad weather?

Simon: It does, although we do still get some spotting on them. When you open up a Reed avocado, it doesn't automatically go brown, it takes time, but it will stabilise for hours. And then of course it's a very big fruit, so for those who want to entertain or use it in salads or make a guacamole, there's plenty of flesh there. It's good value.

SM: Do you think the advent of so many cooking shows on TV and people's growing knowledge about their food and where it comes from makes them better at using the product?

Sue: Oh yes. They're a lot better educated.

Simon: They're more experienced at determining when fruit is ready. We pick them off the tree when they're mature, but they're certainly not ripe as such. It takes days, up to a fortnight or even longer, before they're ready to consume, so it's experience. That is unless we supply ripe fruit, which we tend to resist a little bit because it gets damaged. People pick it up and they fiddle around with it and it gets bruised and so on. I think the use has expanded tremendously. The Avocado Association has been very good. They're extremely interested in making sure that the product is presented in the right way to the marketplace. They do a significant amount of work in explaining it, and they've obviously pushed for consumption. A baby will take an avocado and eat it because of its flavour and its flesh and its softness. So, you've got to catch the audience from that point.

SM: Do you look at what's going on with the amount of plantings around Manjimup and Pemberton and wonder if it's going to be sustainable?

Simon: If the Avocado Association has its way, it is sustainable, but there will have to be a substantial amount of export as well and obviously free trade agreements. There's a substantial amount of development in avocados to store them better, and Manjimup is obviously doing that which means that avocados can be packaged in a way that people at home can use them very easily and they remains in a stable condition. I think those things will help tremendously, but if everybody decides that they want to use every

corner of South West Australia to farm avocados, then it'll be too much.

SM: Have you thought about value adding with your product?

Sue: Not at our age.

Simon: We're only in a small way. We only have 150 trees. There are people producing oils and soaps and all sorts of hair conditioners and things like that out of avocados and I think this will continue, if not grow, because it's a very interesting product that can be used for so many different things. It's very versatile, they can even make tea out of the avocado leaf.

SM: How much is known about some of the health advantages and properties of avocado products?

Simon: A reasonable amount. The types of vitamins and so on that are contained within an avocado have certainly been pretty well examined. And of course its "friendly fat" content. It's a super food really. You have to think of it in that context, which is good fortune for us because we grow the thing. It's also good fortune for Australians having started to use it. In fact, Australia is one of the biggest consumers, per head of population, of avocados.

SM: Why do you suppose that is? Our multi-cultural society or that we know more about them and they're freely available?

Simon: All of that I would suggest. Australians are quite good at experimenting with food. Go back to the 60's and there was no experimentation at all. Now? Yes.

SM: From a farming point of view, what are the trees like to look after in the annual cycle?

Simon: Relatively easy, actually. The end of harvest down here is heading into late autumn, early winter. There's not an awful lot to do then, other than to ensure that the water is kept up to the trees. From there into winter, they remain in an almost static state. The interesting thing is that they're actually carrying quite large fruit at that time for next season, but there's nothing much



to be done in the winter.

SM: So new fruit is coming on basically at the same time you're picking the current season?

Simon: Exactly, that's because it takes 13-15 months to grow down here. In late winter into early spring you will start your fertiliser programs, and that pretty well covers the trace elements – the phosphates and the potashes – so that the only fertiliser you're using after that is nitrogen. You don't use a lot of nitrogen at the time when the trees are beginning to bud up because that would interfere with the setting of the fruit. After that, nitrogen gets fed out on a very regular basis right through until the end of autumn again. Spring, inevitably, is the start of the irrigation season again, so there

continued on page 28





from page 27

is a bit of workload there. Going on to pests, there's only one significant pest, and that's dieback. That can be covered two ways: by spraying the whole tree with phosphorus acid and/or by injection. With large trees we tend to favour the injection, and we're doing that on a cycle of probably once every three years. The commercial growers would be doing it every 12 months, if not more frequently, but we have found down here you don't need to do that, so we'd rather not.

SM: And that brings us back to harvesting.

Simon: There's no insect pests of any substance and there are no fungus of any consequence until you pick the fruit, and then we do dip the fruit after we've harvested.

SM: How does the harvest process work?

Simon: The actual workload is very manageable, even by a 70-plus-year-old couple. You only need two. We have a simple rule of thumb: Sue harvests the lowest ones on the tree and I go up the ladder and pick the stuff at the top.

SM: How many passes do you do of the same tree across the season?

Simon: That depends on the quantity of fruit on the tree, but every tree will have a range of small fruit to large fruit. We initially pick those exposed on the outside of the canopy of the tree and then we go back after that and selectively take them out as the market dictates.

SM: What sort of yield do you get from your trees, or is it hard to know? Have you ever measured it?

Simon: It varies tremendously. Yes, we have. Obviously we keep records all the time, but it varies tremendously because of this unique cycle. If you've got fruit that's maturing over 15 months, you're getting a combination of seasons, so if you've got a heavy crop one year, it will lead on to a light crop the next year because the tree can't sustain both. Unfortunately you can't get half of the trees in the orchard to do it one year and the other half of the orchard to do it the next year. The largest crop we grew for 150 trees was eight tonnes. I know that from a really good performing tree we can take in excess of 25 trays of avocados. A tray is 6kg of fruit, so it's significant. This is the reason why avocados have become so popular – because they're heavy producers and there's good money in it.

SM: Where does your fruit go?

Simon: All to Albany. The Farmers Market is one of our biggest markets and then it's all direct marketing – local cafés, local vegie shops and one of the supermarkets.

SM: Do any manage to find their way out of Albany?

Sue: Some have gone to Singapore. And we've had people take them to UK. There was a chef here and he took two trays of Reeds home.

Simon: When they're freshly picked and they're hard, they will travel well. It's only when they get soft

that the damage occurs. The local organisations are very supportive of people growing locally, and that's very fortunate for us.

SM: Do you like avocados yourselves?

Sue: Yes, we do.

Simon: We eat them every day.

SM: Your final meal on Earth and your last opportunity to enjoy your own avocados – what would it be and how would you prepare it?

Simon: Smashed avocado with bacon and poached eggs on toast.

Sue: Prawn cocktail in an avocado.

Simon: The interesting thing is that the first few fruit of the season that we're tasting, we're tasting as much for maturity to ensure that they're ready for the market. This is a sub-tropical fruit that's being grown in a sub-temperate climate, it just doesn't make sense, yet it happens. We here are right on the edge of the envelope for growing avocados. Every season, with this variation in the climate, you'll find differences occurring.

SM: Is the fine line of the growing envelope slowly heading east?

Simon: I think so. The range of varieties is an interesting one because if you're going much further south, or inland where you've got frost factor, that's something that a sub-tropical tree will not tolerate. The development of new varieties of avocado has been extraordinarily slow, but perhaps in the near future people will start to look at that and try and extend its envelope.

SM: But that's not going to be your worry?

Simon: Certainly isn't. I'm 79 this year and Sue's 75. You've got to look ahead and say, well, how much longer are you going to be able to climb the trees at that age? And I don't want to see the whole orchard go backwards simply because I can no longer physically cope with it. Neither of us do. You'd need another probably 70 trees for it to make sense to pay someone to do it, but that's not the way it's evolved, so we're happy to keep it as it is. Whoever decides to acquire the property, they can extend and do whatever else they want to do to take it further.

SM: In the meantime, what else have you been experimenting with?

Sue: We've got truffles here. Six years ago we bought some little oak trees that were inoculated. We haven't investigated yet, because we haven't got a truffle dog.

SM: You must be dying of curiosity to know what's there.

Simon: Come May or June would be the first opportunity to go and see what's going on. We thought we'd do this when we were younger. And why not? When you've got a piece of land, why not use it? We also put in some protea and they're big bushes now. If we wanted to, we could take protea to the market as an added source of income, but there's limits to what you can do.

SM: But then again, it's an attractive prospect for the next person who comes along.

Simon: Absolutely. **S**

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