



Don Ruggiero and his dad Charlie.

# IT'S IN THE BAG

Nigel Hopkins traces the remarkable rise of a packaged product that Australians take for granted. And it happened right here...

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Tear away the thin, unyielding plastic. The leaves are crisp, they taste good. In fact they'll stay that way for at least a week if you leave them in the bag.

But it's just a lettuce in a bag, you cry – where's the story in that?! Well, like the lettuce, this tale has many leaves and the deeper you go the sweeter it gets.

It's a story that takes root in Campagna, where Italian villagers didn't do anything so preposterous as to put lettuces in bags. They just grew them and ate them, there and then. But they knew all about freshness and flavour.

Don Ruggiero knows about lettuce freshness. He and his wife Kathy run Swanport Harvest, just outside Murray Bridge, which won't mean a lot to anyone until you mention Staycrisp lettuce – and then suddenly it means a lot, because Don and the technology he's invented and adapted has revolutionised the iceberg lettuce trade in Australia.

Go into Woolworths or any decent fruit and veg store and there they are, crisp and fresh. And because they've been grown in the alluvial soil around Murray Bridge rather than in some hydroponic tub full of artificial nutrients, they also have great flavour.

Don learnt about flavour from his parents, especially through his mother Maria's cooking – everything home-grown, just as it was in Benevento. But it all started with his father, Charlie, who's now 84. In 1955, he left the village of Benevento to make his fortune in Australia, working as a road builder until he could afford to buy a small piece of land at Murray Bridge. He had no horticultural experience but he started building glasshouses for tomatoes and cucumbers.

"He had a great deal of foresight," Don says, "because he also bought other people's produce and was able to start dealing with Woolworths 45 years ago."

When Don was 14, Charlie moved to a bigger 16 hectare property and added field-grown onions, lettuce and pumpkins to the menu. Glasshouses, of which few now remain around Murray Bridge, had gone out of fashion as bigger, better, hydroponic glasshouses were built around Virginia. Charlie had seen the trend and was moving from glasshouse to field-grown produce.

Although a keen enough student, Don loved the outdoor life and left school at 16 to work on the property. "It's got nothing to do with money," he says. "I just loved the outdoors – being in the elements. Glasshouses seemed claustrophobic to me."

When he took over the business in the 1980s Don saw the need to specialise. He focussed on growing lettuces (although baby broccoli, cos lettuce, onions and pak choy remain important crops). Today, that original 16 hectares is a massive 100 hectare operation employing up to 50 local people, with another three licensed growers adding another 125 hectares to the business.

The figures start to get astronomical when you consider that the land produces three lettuce crops a year, at 35 to 40 tonnes per hectare, with onions producing 60 tonnes per hectare (two crops a year) and broccoli at 12 tonnes per hectare.

In 1996 – during his 'salad days' – he took a year off with his family to see the world. He bought a whacking big motorhome and toured the US (towing a car behind it), then shipped it to Europe where he saw the future in the way fresh produce was sold.

"They were about 10 years ahead of us in the way they packaged fresh produce," he says. "In Europe about 90 percent of produce is value-added through packaging, which means improved freshness, less product shrinkage and better hygiene. I find it really bizarre now that people are prepared to buy produce that others have picked up, squeezed and smelled."

In Scotland, in between rounds of golf at St Andrews, he watched a strange contraption bagging lettuces immediately as they were picked in the field. This sowed an idea every bit as fertile as the Murray Bridge soil – an idea that took a couple of years to mature as he pondered how he could best add value to his products through innovation.

Don's mind was focussed on food wastage – appalled that around 30 percent of all food bought by Australians gets thrown away, often because it's past its 'use by' date. He thought he could extend that 'use by' date through packaging.

He designed and built two mobile packaging machines that could pick and bag iceberg lettuces in the field, then take them almost immediately to be vacuum cooled.

The Swanport Harvest Staycrisp lettuce was in the bag.

"The first few years were really hard going as we found it difficult to establish a premium product in what is a commodity market," Don says.

But as extended shelf life and minimal product shrinkage are required by both retailers and consumers, and as Don's lettuces catered to both of these needs, he now supplies national markets through Woolworths, Foodland, IGA and many independent stores.

Today it's the best selling wrapped lettuce in Australia. And it's a measure of the strong consumer appeal of Staycrisp lettuce that Don is able to set its price, rather than have it set by the supermarkets.

"Other producers around Australia have tried to do the same but none has got it right," he says. "People think it's just putting a lettuce in a bag, but it's more than that. It's all about maintaining a specific standard for a product and not going with something that doesn't meet that standard."

"It's a difficult thing to achieve with a perishable product, out in the elements. Maybe it was just perseverance that did it for us." \*

## The secret of Swanport

Situated on the banks of the Murray River with the rich soils and climatic conditions, Swanport is one of the few places in Australia where lettuce, and other vegetables, can be grown all year round.

"But it's not just the soil," Don says. "The biggest factor is the climate. We might be only 45 minutes from Adelaide but the temperatures here are quite different due to the sea breeze we get from Lake Alexandrina."

"On a 38 degree day in Adelaide it can be only 20 degrees here if a southerly breeze kicks in. It always cools down at night, and being close to the river also has a cooling effect. There's also a theory that we get a cooling backdraught from Mount Barker. People don't realise what a unique location this is."

"It means we can plant 52 weeks a year. It's one of the very few places in Australia where lettuce can be grown all year round."

He looks after the soil, too, making sure it's kept in top condition by applying organic fertiliser at the rate of 800 kilograms per hectare for lettuce, and up to double that for onions, which he plants throughout June to September.

"The need to maintain organic matter input is critical as we don't have cover crops," he says. "We tried raw manures and green wastes, but found them to be very labour intensive, with added concerns of introducing weeds and disease."

So that's how you go about producing more than 20 million lettuces a year – and naming your own price. We're not privy to annual turnover, but at around \$2 wholesale per lettuce, we get the picture.