

Purple passion

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Photographs: Sally Tagg



Growing kumara is a business that's all about people.



Gary Blundell knows a thing or two about kumara. After 40 years of growing, handling, selling and eating kumara he's got a fair few facts and a lot of experience under his belt, so to speak. Kumara is in his blood – and he's passed his passion on to his two sons, Anthony and Peter.

Although he now takes a bit of a back seat at Kaipara Kumara, the family company that he founded, he was a trailblazer in his time.

"One of the greatest attributes Dad had when he started the company was vision," says Anthony. "He stepped out of the produce auction system and started supplying Foodtown direct 40 years ago when they were a chain of just four stores."

The decision required plenty of stamina on all sorts of levels, right down to how they were going to find crates for supplying produce, which traditionally had been provided by the auction system.

Kiwi ingenuity came to the fore and Gary milled the timber to make replacement crates. Anthony and Peter spent school holidays helping out by stamping the company's brand on them.

Plastic crates eventually replaced the wooden variety and, though a lot more has changed in the intervening years, the Blundells are emphatic that one thing has remained the same.

"Dad's always insisted that produce is a people business," says Anthony.

"Pete and I have had that tattooed into our minds since we were just little kids."

This philosophy includes everyone from the growers, such as Brian Henderson whose father Max was one of the first to supply the crop to the company, to many of the 30 staff who work at the processing plant in Ruawai.

There's Laurie Oliver, who was first employed at the site more than 50 years ago when it was in its former incarnation as the local dairy factory. Other members of his family have joined him working for the company at various times, including his grandchildren.

Jill Jennings has clocked up 37 years with Kaipara Kumara, and shows no signs of wanting to leave yet. Receptionist Joanne Reed joined the company intending to stay a few months and nearly four years later is still there. "She's got a fair way



Laurie Oliver



to go to catch up to Jill, but you never know,” Gary jokes.

The factory operates under strict guidelines, from the “seed” programme that maintains and improves the quality of the crop to annual independent auditing to ensure that the in-house processing systems meet exacting standards.

And, when it comes to eating kumara, Anthony reckons that it is so yummy when freshly harvested that it can be grated and eaten raw. Roasted with herbs and in a curry are other favourites.

Small kumara used to be considered unsuitable for marketing but the fact that they were the sweetest was not lost on the Blundells and now bags of Kumara Sweeties are gaining such popularity

that they can’t get enough of them to satisfy demand. They also supply the Freshzone range of larger gourmet-sized, pre-packed kumara.

Years ago, when the Big Fresh chain closed, Gary purchased some of the supermarket instore decorations and now the colourful fruit and vegetables figures prance along the roofline of the factory. Centre stage is a kumara happily taking a shower. The fun façade is a traffic stopper and is a favourite with groups of passing tourists.

People love it and often take photographs. It’s easy to imagine the laughing kumara being appreciated all around the globe, and the real-life version being enjoyed at dining tables all over New Zealand.

Fact file

- Kumara are fat-free, cholesterol-free and are low in sodium.
- They are a good source of potassium, vitamin A and vitamin C.
- Other nutrients include vitamin B6, calcium and iron.
- They are a great source of dietary fibre and have more fibre than oatmeal.
- The main harvest period is over the months of February, March and April.