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Garlic grower urges consumers to buy local, quality produce to cut down on food waste

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By Jessica Schremmer



Grower Russell Zahnow says more consumer awareness is needed to save the garlic industry.
(ABC Rural: Jessica Schremmer)

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Grower Russell Zahnow says more consumer awareness is needed to save the garlic industry.

ABC Rural: Jessica Schremmer

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An Australian garlic farmer has prompted consumers to buy locally grown garlic and to leave the imported product behind as most of the local product goes to waste even though it is superior in quality.

Russell Zahnow started-out growing one acre of garlic six years ago on his property near Mundubbera in Queensland's Wide Bay-Burnett region.

He planted 20 acres this year, but said he was forced to look at optional export markets because the imported, cheap garlic was his biggest challenger.

According to the Australian Garlic Producers group, 95 per cent of Australia's garlic is imported from China and is often sprayed with chemicals that are banned in Australia.

Mr Zahnow said the imported product was often bleached and had to be treated to prevent potential bacteria coming into the country.

"The Australian garlic hasn't had that treatment so you've got a much stronger flavour and a lot better aroma that is much better eating," he said.



Letetia Ware says Australian grown garlic is a clean commercial product reflecting high standards.

(ABC Wide Bay: Ross Kay)

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Letetia Ware says Australian grown garlic is a clean commercial product reflecting high standards.

ABC Wide Bay: Ross Kay

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Chair of the Australian Garlic Industry Association Letetia Ware said Australia had a very high standard of a clean commercial production not reflected in the imported product.

Most countries that import garlic have different standards of chemical controls and checks.

"There are many countries around the world that are using chemicals, herbicides, fungicides that would be restricted or prohibited in Australia, so we have a different level of contamination coming in," Ms Ware said.

Mr Zahnow said it was sad to see local, high-quality product go to waste.

"There is a big revolving door of growers and it's a shame because we can grow good Australian garlic. But we are not getting a fair deal, I suppose," he said.

"Growers can't sell their product and it gets dumped, believe it or not, and many then leave the industry.

"The local market is too tough and that's a reason why we are looking outside the square, trying to establish an export market to Japan."

Australian garlic industry challenges

A still-prevalent challenge for growers comes from the collapse of the industry in the 1990s when bulbs from China were imported at a price cheaper than local growers could compete with.

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Ms Ware said it was difficult for the industry to recover and growers had to start from scratch.

"Back then we not only lost the experienced growers but also government support and the investment in research and development," she said.

"Today you've got an industry that had to learn from scratch, which is fairly challenging for growers and people wanting to start in the industry."



Russell Zahnow grows Glen Large in his paddock and says it is more flavoursome and aromatic than the imported products.
(Supplied: Russell Zahnow)

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Russell Zahnow grows Glen Large in his paddock and says it is more flavoursome and aromatic than the imported products.

Supplied: Russell Zahnow

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Ms Ware said at present, the Australian industry was not able to produce garlic all year around and could not satisfy the Australian demand.

The association's focus has been to get farmers to grow different varieties around Australia so local high-quality garlic was available all year and could compete in terms of availability with the imported product.

"The early cut-over by our wholesalers to the imported product during our Australian fresh garlic season is a challenge and certainly impacts where our growers can sell and what the price is the they can sell it at," Ms Ware said.

Support for the local product needed

Mr Zahnow said more consumer awareness and understanding would not just help the industry grow and not waste their product, but also allow people eat a better and healthier garlic.

"What you pay for you are actually getting back in the quality of the product that you are eating," he said.



Russell Zahnow says he has to look at optional markets overseas to sell his product.
(Supplied: Russell Zahnow)

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Russell Zahnow says he has to look at optional markets overseas to sell his product.

Supplied: Russell Zahnow

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"I think there also needs to be more awareness in the restaurant industry.

"I understand that everyone has a budget, but with a high-quality, clean product you've got the best meal because you've got a good flavour in it."

Ms Ware said many consumers were not aware of the different garlics that were coming throughout the season and what they were — especially in a culinary sense.

"Queensland, for example, has a very unique garlic. It's a subtropical garlic, grown in a warm climate and daylight neutral. Whereas most garlic around the world is actually a temperate climate garlic that requires a cold winter," she said.

Mr Zahnow said he hoped the industry would stabilise and local growers could sell most of their product to Australian consumers.

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