

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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HD **Lavender-Filled Teddy Bears From Tasmania Are a Big Hit in China; Maker of 'Bobbie Bear' Can't Keep Up With Demand; Tapping the 'Psyche of 30-Year-Old Chinese Ladies'**
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WC 1,135 words
PD 10 April 2014
ET 08:32
SN The Wall Street Journal Online
SC WSJO
ED WSJ.com
LA English
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NABOWLA, Tasmania—Starting weeks before Christmas, Robert Ravens had to ration sales of teddy bears to people visiting his lavender farm in this remote corner of Australia to one per customer. Demand was so fierce that as soon as each furry purple Bobbie Bear shell was stuffed with a mixture of lavender and wheat, it was rushed straight to the gift store.

Mr. Ravens had already stopped shipping overseas and interstate. He had stopped taking Internet orders. His small staff at Bridestowe Lavender Estate couldn't keep up with demand coming almost solely from one place: China.

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"We're not aiming to dominate the world of fluffy bears. Our business is fine lavender," said Mr. Ravens. "But somehow we've tapped the cultural psyche of 30-year-old Chinese ladies."

The rush on Bobbie Bears is what happens when suddenly insatiable Chinese demand meets limited supply. Mr. Ravens said the farm—where a spacious gift shop overlooks trim rows of lavender, an hour's drive through quiet farmland from the closest airport—has seen "near riot" conditions since the rationing began. The annual number of visitors has nearly tripled in six years to 60,000 in 2013.

Wealthy Chinese have bid up the price of investment assets in recent years from property in Vancouver to French Bordeaux and modern art. As prosperity in China spreads, Chinese are doing the same with consumer goods.

Voracious demand from Chinese tourists for luxury goods to give as gifts or to sell at a markup back home often threatens to clear the shelves of major brands in France. Gucci stores in Paris sometimes limit the number of bags customers can buy per passport to ensure supply.

Karicare, a brand of milk powder made from New Zealand goats' milk that sells in Australia and New Zealand, has quadrupled production to 20,000 tons over the last three years to meet demand from Chinese consumers, some of whom are reselling online in China. Even that might not be enough.

The company, a unit of Group Danone, says on its website that due to "unprecedented demand" it cannot find enough high quality goats milk.

The craze for Bobbie the teddy bear has come with all the attendant effects of a China boom.

Bridestowe sells Bobbie for about \$48.50 or about 300 yuan, up from about \$23 five years ago, after raising the price five times. In China, online retailers currently sell them for about 400 yuan, up from 300 only a few months ago. But, Mr. Ravens said, many are knockoffs; his authorized distributor estimates 100,000 fakes have been sold online. Three online retailers reached in China all said they were selling authentic Bobbie Bears.

The price of lavender in Australia is also rising, selling for \$55 to \$90 per kilogram, up from less than \$40 a year ago, according to Jean Sargeant, president of the Australian Lavender Growers Association.

"I've had three lots of **Chinese** here over the picking season," said Ms. Sargeant. "One guy said 'I'll **buy** the entire crop.' "

Bobbie Bears have tapped into **Chinese** consumers' desire for peace of mind after recurring food and product safety scandals at home.

"Anything natural from somewhere with blue skies and clean air and water is dreamy for **Chinese** consumers," said Chen Huan, a 28-year-old who works for a public-relations **firm** in Shanghai. She bought four bears—three as gifts—from a friend.

The outside of the bear itself is made in southern **China**. What consumers want is stuffing: lavender grown in Tasmania, without pesticides or herbicides, and locally-grown wheat, which warms up when microwaved so that the bear also works as a heat pack.

Mr. Ravens, who used to be chief executive of a chemicals **company**, and his wife Jennifer bought the 92-year-old farm in 2007 as a retirement project. They started making teddy bears as a way to use the shed-loads of dried lavender that came with the farm. Soon they developed the idea of selling the bears to market the farm for tourism. Seeing the bear was popular among **Chinese** tourists to the farm, they got a store near **Chinatown** in Sydney to stock them. Two years ago they started marketing them in **Hong Kong** with the help of a celebrity chef from there.

Demand in mainland **China** took off in July. A 26-year-old **Chinese** celebrity famous for dating a **Hong Kong** television personality—and whose ex-boyfriend is a distributor of Bobbie in **China**—posted a photo of herself with the bear on social media. "The ideal bedtime companion for a cold Shanghai night," Zhang Xinyu told her 8.7 **million** followers on Weibo, a microblogging **site**.

Bridestowe stuffed 30,000 bears last year—up from 3,500 in 2011 and 7,500 in 2012—and expects to double production this year, using a full ton of lavender for stuffing, rather than for aromatic oils, its traditional use.

Nancy Li, a tour guide from the southern **Chinese** city of Shenzhen, led a **group** of middle-aged **Chinese** men around Tasmania in late January. She said that she intended to **buy** 60 bears for family and friends from Bridestowe, but decided not to visit when she heard she could only **buy** one.

Mr. Ravens said people regularly try to get around the bear-buying restriction. Some people hire students to enter and leave the Bridestowe farm multiple times a day, repeatedly buying an admission ticket of about \$14 that entitles them to the right to **buy** a bear, he said. Some tour guides will **buy** the admission tickets but then not hand them over to the **group**, instead hoarding the bears for themselves, he said.

While at the farm, a middle-aged **Chinese** academic approached this reporter to try to **buy** an additional bear.

Mr. Ravens said people often get angry when they learn they can only **buy** one bear. "The staff are always on edge. Tempers get frayed," he said. "Our staff don't cope so well" with the animosity.

With this year's lavender crop now in, Mr. Ravens has resumed selling the bears wholesale again to some stores. He is also fighting back against the counterfeiters, with each Bobbie coming with an identification tag that buyers can verify on line.

As far as Mr. Ravens is concerned, one sniff is enough to determine authenticity. "The Bridestowe lavender is a global classic. It's unmatched. It's rich and deep," he said. "You can tell a fake from the smell."

Yang Jie and Laurie Burkitt contributed to this article.

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AN Document WSJO000020140410ea49000p3