

HD THE LATEST CRAYS

BY words nigel austin

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The Von Stanke family has built a town and a way of life on SA's Limestone Coast, helping pioneer one of Australia's greatest food export success stories by putting lobster on the plates of **China** AS A NEW day dawns across the Limestone Coast, Robert Von Stanke, powers the Loco **M** Ocean through breaking waves and navigates a tiny gap in a reef to leave Bucks Bay, a beautiful natural harbour at Carpenter Rocks. It's a familiar route for the 66-year-old but as he makes his way along the coast in the 7m trawler to his lobster pots, he takes nothing for granted. No matter how experienced you are, life at sea is a constant battle against the elements and the unknowns lurking below your hull.

Twenty minutes later, he reaches his first pots and methodically winches them up from two to 20m below on the seabed, before emptying them of their precious catch and resetting them.

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Life has followed much the same routine for Von Stanke for more than half a century – ever since he left school as a 12-year-old and started as a deckhand on the Carina, a family lobster boat, in 1960.

Working for his Uncle Fred and then Uncle Jack and father Bob, he learnt the ropes the hard way, fending for himself in a family that wrestled the ocean every day.

Weather permitting, they would head out to sea at 4am, fish all day, then return to Carpenter Rocks with their catch. In those days, there were plenty of crayfish – as they were then known. All the fishermen had to do was put down a pot and pull it up. But the market was meagre; Australians didn't eat a lot of crayfish back then. Life was tough for a man selling fish in an era when the average Australian ate about 90kg of beef, mutton and lamb a year.

Consumption of crustaceans and molluscs was a mere .5kg a year. Australians even ate more rabbit and hare, tucking away close to a kilogram a year. This was a time before the nation's tastebuds awoke. **Wine** consumption was only about five glasses a year.

Today, Australia's culinary range is vastly wider than when Von Stanke was starting out. Fish consumption is up, and the southern rock lobster, as the crayfish is now called, is chief among delicacies. And not just in this country.

As the Asian dining boom looms large, the southern rock lobster is helping to open the door for other seafood products and is enhancing the nation's reputation for clean, safe food.

And this year, the South Australian beach price has soared to \$80kg-\$100kg. SA's annual quota is the lowest it has been since being introduced in 1992 to ensure the long-term sustainability of the lobster population, cutting the annual allowable lobster harvest from 2400 tonnes in 2006-07 to 1600 tonnes this year. The shrinking quota is the latest challenge the Von Stanke family faces after more than seven decades of building its **business**.

The family weathered the industry's lean years, struggling to make a living, but their boat has now come in, literally and figuratively.

"It has been a constant battle against the sea," Von Stanke says. "It's been hard, it's been cruel, but we're still here.

"I've always loved it. I never did anything else in my whole life, never wanted to, and it's been bloody good for our family. Where else can you have all your family with you? We've done fantastically well to stick together for so long." Today, after a morning's fishing, he guides his boat back to harbour and its berth. Sonny the cocker spaniel, frenetically wagging his tail, waits on the nearby beach.

By the time Von Stanke has tied up the boat, Sonny has swum the 80m to the boat and is paddling, waiting to be scooped aboard for the trip back to shore.

Von Stanke unloads his bounty of southern rock lobster, harvested from the pristine waters of the Southern Ocean. These treasures from the deep are weighed and recorded at Stanke Ociana Seafoods, the family's processing and marketing arm, a mere 50m from the sea. Within two days, the live lobsters are on their way to Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport for shipment to **China**. When they reach their destination, and the **Chinese** middlemen add their mark-up, they will sell to hungry consumers for nearly double their beach value, sometimes far more.

The southern rock lobster is the most sought-after lobster on earth – its reputation enhanced by its rich red colour and its home in the pollution-free waters of the Southern Ocean.

The lobster's popularity with consumers has helped it become the success story of the Australian seafood industry and the highest priced food exported from Australia in any quantity as the **China**-led mining boom is joined by the dining boom.

South Australia produces nearly 60 per cent of the annual southern rock lobster catch. Victoria and Tasmania catch the rest.

Its popularity has helped lobster-fishing ports around our state's coast emerge as the powerhouse of the world's lobster industry.

Two hundred professional lobster boats harvest these delicacies, creating about \$300 **million** in economic activity for our state annually and employing more than 1300.

Here in the little town of Carpenter Rocks, 33km southwest of Mount Gambier, the Von Stanke family's fortunes have ebbed and flowed in line with those of the lobster industry since the 1940s.

Lobsters have been the lifeblood for Robert, his brother Marty, 49, and about 15 other family members who also fish. A similar number of family members work for Stanke Ociana Seafoods. Every day, three generations fish side-by-side on 12 boats.

Stanke Ociana Seafoods is one of the state's largest lobster exporters and, in addition to the family's catch, the **company** buys lobsters from other fishermen in the major South East ports.

It air-freights hundreds of tonnes of the delicacy to **China** each year. The Von Stanke family is particularly proud of the role it has played over the past 75 years to build the lobster trade into one of Australia's great food sectors. Robert Von Stanke vividly recalls the time back in 1988 when **China** gained a taste for the southern rock lobster.

The Von Stanke family was among the first to send live lobsters to **China**, battling to break into the tough market.

Virtually overnight, **China** started buying most of Australia's annual harvest, helping the fishermen achieve a major increase in profitability as the lobster price trebled to \$15kg to \$18kg and even \$20kg.

The change from shipping lobster tails to the US sparked a major increase in profitability and transformed the industry.

"We went to **China** on marketing trips in 1988 and the challenge of breaking into the **Chinese** market was very difficult because of the language barrier," Robert Von Stanke says. "We had to find our own markets, but once we succeeded and started sending live lobsters to **China** there was no stopping the trade. It was unbelievable compared with the US tail market, and then the price jumped to \$30kg, \$40kg and \$50kg. As the price jumped so did the cost of everything, but as the price rose, it increased the value of our quotas and businesses and helped the industry remain viable." Brother Steve Von Stanke was a driving force in the family's export of live lobsters to **China** along with family members John and Ian Von Stanke. Almost without realising it, the Von Stanke family and other fishermen absorbed the most important lesson of all in providing food to **China**: they added value by delivering live lobsters, providing the thing that **Chinese** consumers value most of all – healthy, fresh, safe food.

The **Chinese** are the greatest lobster consumers on earth. They eat about 86 per cent of the southern rock lobster caught in SA, Tasmania and Victoria each year.

This figure represents about 10 per cent of the total value of Australia's food exports to **China**, bigger than **dairy** and even **wine** industry sales.

China has had a large influence on Robert Von Stanke's life. He met his wife Lilli in **China** on a marketing trip. Lilli says eating seafood is a rich tradition in **China**, but, since the introduction of the **Chinese** government's austerity drive – introduced to rein in lavish spending by state officials – most lobster has been consumed at wedding parties, where it is eaten raw like sashimi with ice and lemon, or cooked with creamy **cheese** and spaghetti.

"The average person can't afford it, but for a wedding the whole family puts in money," Lilli says. "It's so popular and red is very lucky in **China**. "Seafood is also good for your health and a symbol of your wealth. And the **Chinese** are very fond of wild-caught food." The Von Stanke family has fished these waters since ancestor Carl Johann Ehregott Siegfried Von Stanke settled here in the late 1800s, seeking a better life.

He had rebelled against his family's wish that he become an army officer and land owner and left the family's ancestral home of Stankesruhe, Prussia, on September 11, 1879.

He travelled to England where he realised his prospects were grim and quickly accepted a job as a miner in South Africa.

It turned out to be little better than slavery and family legend has it that he soon escaped and caught a ship from Capetown arriving in Semaphore, Adelaide, on February 8, 1882. Some say he arrived with diamonds in his pockets.

He worked as a gardener at Whyte Yarcowie, near Terowie, for five months, followed by jobs in Mount Gambier and Ballarat, where he married, before moving back to Mount Gambier with his wife Elizabeth and three young children. He was a bailiff at the Mount Gambier Court, then added jobs as the Inspector of Fisheries for the Mount Gambier region from 1910 and Inspector of Game from 1919.

Carl filled all three roles until his death in 1939, assisted in his later years by son Hercules, who was appointed honorary Inspector of Fisheries in April of 1932. In the 1940s, Hercules would catch crayfish at Pelican Point, near Carpenter Rocks, pile them into a sack, balance it on the handlebars of his bicycle and pedal the 33km to Mount Gambier, where he would do the rounds of the pubs, selling the lobsters for two shillings a pound, if the meat-eating Aussies could be tempted.

One of the family's best moves, although it didn't realise it at the time, came when Hercules and his three sons Fred, Bob and Jack, settled a hundred or so hectares of coastal land around Bucks Bay in the 1940s. They farmed it along with other land that they leased to produce food for the family. Today, that block forms the majority of Carpenter Rocks where about 120 family members live in 35 houses built in communal fashion over two decades from the 1950s.

Few families have such a large **stake** in an Australian town as the Von Stanke family has in Carpenter Rocks.

The three brothers started the crayfishing **business** in 1946, partly to keep the family together.

They **sold** their catch wherever they could find a buyer. By the early 1950s, most was going to Melbourne, which remained their main buyer until 1963 when the family started exporting lobster tails to the United States. The Von Stanke family started the Cape Banks Processing **Company** and built a factory on the shores of Bucks Bay to export lobster tails in 1963. The family was making more money than ever before. John Von Stanke, one of the sons of the three founders, says the US remained the main market until the 1980s when the live lobster trade started, initially to **Hong Kong**, Japan and Taiwan.

During the 1980s, the family took on the Stanke Ociana Seafoods **business** name. Robert says the three founders were his mentors and were visionaries, although they were hard taskmasters.

"We'd leave at 4am and fish all day, as we built the **business**," he says. "They were very strong and they got on well together and although they argued, when it was over, it was soon forgotten." In those early pre-quota days, they fished for about 11 months of the year. When not at sea, they built houses for all the family and single men's quarters for workmen on the shore of Bucks Bay.

Today, in a quirk of history, the land they bought around Bucks Bay in the 1940s forms the basis for Carpenter Rocks where the family members live and work in the town, built mostly on one title.

Their fish factory employs about 40 people during the peak fishing season. The family also owns the Carpenter Rocks shop. "We've got the best of everything here and until now we've liked to keep it to ourselves," says Marty Von Stanke, a director of Stanke Ociana Seafoods and the South Australian Rock Lobster Advisory Council.

"Carpenter Rocks is not on a road to anywhere. You've got to come here to come here, but it's time for the family to move on.

Once upon a time somebody would drive into town and you'd look and say 'Who's that'? Now a lot of tourists come to the camping ground or visit for the day and there are a few rental properties." He started fishing when he was 16.

"It was just my path in life, but I enjoy what I do and I've had a good life," Marty says. "Fishing is like hunting – you either know where to go or you don't.

"Some people fish out on the Continental Shelf in 200m of water where the lobsters are white. Others stick close to shore where the bright red lobsters attract the highest prices in **China** due to their fondness for all things red." He says, not surprisingly, that eating lobster is a family favourite. "We eat it quite regularly, it's a beautiful food, prepared in a variety of ways and it is definitely our favourite seafood." But he acknowledges it is a luxury when it sells for such high prices on the international market.

"At the moment we're going through tough times with the Southern Zone quota down to 1250 tonnes, the lowest since quotas started in 1992. The lobster industry is vital to this region because it's all we've got in these coastal towns along with pine trees and farming," he says.

"Everything is easier and more efficient these days. The boats and cabins have been modernised, they are more comfortable and electronic GPS systems help the fishermen know exactly where they are all the time, while reducing travelling and fuel wastage.

Pot winches make it a lot easier to haul up the pots compared with the old days when we had to pull them up by hand from 100m down and you would lose 100 pots a year.

Now you only lose about 10 pots. Also, you know far more about the weather and can move your pots to safer and deeper water, if necessary." Still, no one does it quite like the Von Stanke family. The modern boats are a stark contrast to the family's first lobster boat, the Dauntless, an 8.5m yacht, which they sailed back from Adelaide, navigating by the stars, arriving at Kingston SE after a week. It was converted into a fishing boat complete with cabin, but it wasn't ideal.

Eventually, a decision was made to make specialty lobster boats, providing more stability, a shallow draft and decent motor.

Among the family members Lucy Von Stanke, 21, the daughter of Marty and wife Trish Von Stanke has a passion for the food industry. "Carpenter Rocks was a good place to grow up," she says. "I wouldn't live anywhere else. I love getting home and hearing and smelling the ocean. I have always loved food and hope to work into the family **business** through what I do, maybe one day showcasing our product." Lucy is focused on sourcing local produce for the Soul Projects restaurant at the Lakes Resort in Mount Gambier, where she works as a chef alongside resident chef Kerby Shearing. "We know where everything on our menu comes from and all the processes that it has gone through to get to our plate," she says. "Being a small region we have to look after one another.

"We use lobster from time to time and octopus and crabs. In winter I pick pine mushrooms and slippery jacks in the pine forests. Along the coast we pick samphire, coastal parsley, coastal figs, pigface, elder berries, bower spinach and saltbush. And when the seas are nice and calm, you swim out and pick seaweed from the ocean floor. Most of them are edible, you wouldn't believe the different flavours and textures of species such as sea grapes." Her brother Marty junior, 24, has battled the elements on a daily basis since leaving school as a 15-year-old "because Michael Wilson at Blackfellows Caves needed a deckhand". "There was no point being at school, this is what I wanted to do," he says. He has skippered a lobster boat on and off since he was 21 and regards working with his uncle Steve as crucial to gaining the knowledge required to be the fisherman he is today.

The future appears bright for the younger generation because world seafood consumption is growing strongly, particularly in developing countries such as **China**. A Primary Industries and Regions SA report says **China** lifted its seafood imports from \$1 **billion** in 2007 to \$4.5 **billion** in 2010.

Virtually everyone in food is eyeing the dream of tapping into the wealthy **Chinese** consumer market. Elders Fine Foods general manager Craig Aldous, based in Shanghai, says the success of the lobster sector highlights the potential for other high-value foods to follow in its wake. "Five years ago, I said the demand from **China** will be so great that you won't be able to **buy** lobster, abalone and wagyu beef in

Australia," he says. "My specialty is meat and I can see the potential for that to happen with other higher value food products." Ironically, at the same time, 72 per cent of the seafood that Australian consumers eat is low-quality, low-cost product from Vietnam, Thailand, **China** and New Zealand.

The remarkable potential of **China** was shown by a prediction from the Economist Intelligence Unit in March suggesting that it will increase its purchases from 12 per cent of Australia's total food exports in 2007 to nearly 60 per cent in 2030. The forecast is allied to various predictions that at least 60 per cent more food will be needed to feed the world's fast-growing population by 2050.

But the industry can be improved.

Southern Rock Lobster Limited executive officer Ross Hodge, who visited **China** last year, concluded that significant potential exists to expand the market because it has "much fame" in **China** – but promotion of it is virtually non-existent.

He highlighted the potential to sell value-added and packaged portions and frozen lobster in **China**, although it is debatable whether the industry has enough supply to go down this path.

"The **Chinese** really emphasised the opportunity for anything that is value-added to be carried out in Australia because of our reputation for food safety," Hodge says. "It is a general criticism of Australia that we export so many raw commodities when there is a very good opportunity to also export value-added and processed products to **China** because we are seen as safe." Sustainability is a major focus of the industry. All the Von Stanke fishing vessels are accredited under the industry's unique "Clean Green" program, a world-first lobster supply chain management strategy. It includes "pot to plate" standards covering environmental management, food safety, quality, workplace safety and animal welfare. The family is confident that the strategy and strong management by the Fisheries Department and various management groups will ensure the industry's sustainability and help increase the quota one day. All Australian lobster fisheries are managed by state and federal governments to ensure the long-term sustainability of the species and to minimise impacts on the marine environment and biodiversity.

Robert Von Stanke has witnessed great change in the lobster industry as it has risen from battling **business** to world leader. Since starting as a humble deckhand, aged little more than a child, the weeks have slowly become months and years and eventually a lifetime. "I'm not going to retire, I'll keep fishing until I can't go any longer," he says.

It's what he loves and then he'll quietly fade away, as old fishermen do.

SOUTHERN ROCK LOBSTER *Jasus edwardsii* FOUND across southern Australia and New Zealand in habitats ranging from the rocky coastline to the continental shelf. They vary in colour from rich red in shallower water to a pale creamy colour in the deeper waters off the continental shelf.

THE SOUTHERN ROCK LOBSTER has 10 walking legs, but does not have large claws like many of the world's lobster species. On females the fifth or last pair of legs terminates in a small claw to tend to eggs carried under the tail. The mating season runs from April to July while hatching occurs in September and October. The male has no claw and its fifth walking leg ends as a point.

LOBSTERS eat animals or plants and feed at night on fish, molluscs, other crustaceans, worms and plant life. They move by slowly walking across the ocean floor. To avoid predators they are able to swim backwards quickly by curling and uncurling their abdomen.

TO GROW they need to moult, often up to 25 times in their first five years of life and about once a year as an adult.

AUSTRALIA has three main species of lobster: the southern rock lobster, the western rock lobster found in Western Australia and the tropical lobster found across northern Australia.

THE AVERAGE LIFE SPAN is 50 years in the wild. The largest recorded lobster was caught off the coast of Nova Scotia, Canada, weighing 20.14kg, and measuring about 1m long. It was believed to be at least 100 years old.

APPROX SOUTHERN ZONE QUOTA 1250t 1600 TONNES ANNUAL ALLOWABLE LOBSTER HARVEST IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA 60 PER CENTAGE OF THE ANNUAL SOUTHERN ROCK LOBSTER CATCH SOUTH AUSTRALIA PRODUCES. VICTORIA AND TASMANIA CATCH THE REST SOUTHERN ZONE SEASON RUNS FROM OCTOBER 1 TO MAY 31 EMPLOYS MORE THAN 1300 PEOPLE 86% EXPORTED TO **CHINA** 165 FISHING BOATS IN THE SOUTHERN ZONE \$300,000,000 ECONOMIC VALUE A YEAR – SA'S MOST VALUABLE FISHERY 38 FISHING VESSELS IN THE NORTHERN ZONE 350t NORTHERN ZONE QUOTA

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