

SE FARM MAGAZINE
HD SEEDS OF SLOVENIA

BY Sue Wallace
WC 1,385 words
PD 2 July 2014
SN Weekly Times
SC HERWEK
ED 1
PG 20
LA English
CY © 2014 News Limited. All rights reserved.

LP

From central Europe to Victoria's North East, a family tradition of tasty, healthy pumpkin seeds continues. Sue Wallace reports

WHILE GROWING UP IN SLOVENIA, little did John West know the tasty, dark green pumpkin seeds he enjoyed in his central European homeland would one day become his family's business in Victoria's North East.

TD

John's daughter, Sharan, says the story of the family's pumpkin seed business at Ovens, near Myrtleford, definitely has a fairytale element.

"It was the last thing I ever imagined when I was growing up, that I would be following a family tradition and creating Australia's pumpkin seed industry," Sharan says. "Pumpkin seeds and pumpkin seed oil is to the Slovenians and Austrians what olives and olive oil is to the Italians."

IN THE BEGINNING

Growing up in Slovenia, John always loved the dark green pumpkin seeds that were produced on his family's farm near the small town of Maribor. As a young man, he delivered the seeds by horse and cart to the nearby oil press factory, which dated back to 1750, in exchange for pumpkin seed oil the family used in everyday cooking.

In 1959, aged 19, John migrated to Australia. Locals mispronounced his Slovenian surname - Garbajs, calling him Mr Garbage, so he changed his surname to West. "It was easy to spell and everyone could pronounce it," Sharan says. John later met his wife, Helen, and had two daughters, Viki and Sharan.

The family bought a 400-hectare farm in **Chinchilla**, in southeast Queensland, in 1983 and ran cattle. But after a family trip to Slovenia, John planted some Styrian pumpkin, a variety grown for their high oil content seeds, and was surprised at just how well they responded to the Australian soil and climate.

The pumpkin crop remained a hobby until 2002 when Viki and Sharan suggested they should make their own pumpkin seed oil - a dark green, nutty flavoured oil used in salad dressings, as flavoured oil and for its medicinal qualities - from the seeds. "We really missed pumpkin seed oil and nobody was doing it here," Sharan says.

CONTINUED PAGE 23

FROM PAGE 21

They formed the Australian Pumpkin Seed **Company**, starting with two hectares of pumpkins and imported a screw press from Slovenia to extract the oil.

"We found that producing a small quantity of oil from a screw press was not possible," Sharan recalls. "So Dad went back to Slovenia to investigate the traditional equipment used for oil pressing."

John returned to Australia and spent several years building the press and other equipment including seed roasters. (Later the family also bought chocolate panning equipment, a packaging machine and a specialist pumpkin seed harvester from Slovenia.)

In 2004 they **sold** their first snack pumpkin seeds and pumpkin seed oil at the Noosa Farmers' Market, becoming the first Australian growers and **commercial** producers of Australian pumpkin seed products.

"The ball started rolling, we went from growing the special Styrian pumpkin seeds for ourselves to producing oil, seeds for eating, high-protein pumpkin seed meal and turning it into a business," Sharan says. The family's pumpkin crop grew to 20 hectares as sales took off, producing about five tonnes of seeds annually.

In 2010, just when things were going well, John was injured in a car accident. "We had been looking for other areas to continue the business, somewhere that wasn't as remote as **Chinchilla**," Sharan says. "And with Dad unable to farm, it made sense to move."

They **sold** the Queensland **property** and moved to Victoria's North East. Sharan was determined to continue the business and not let eight years of hard work go to waste. "The new location suited my vision of building the pumpkin seed farming industry to supply health food stores across Australia," Sharan says.

They re-established the business, transporting the entire factory and equipment in a convoy from Queensland that took three days. They connected with contract farmers to produce the Styrian pumpkins and they opened the shop and factory in Ovens on Australia Day, 2012.

Today the Wests produce a range of pumpkin seed products including natural seeds, dry roasted, salted, mild chilli coated, naturally wood smoked and dark chocolate coated pumpkin seeds, plus pumpkin seed oil and pumpkin seed meal.

They have a small plot of Styrian pumpkins growing near their factory while the bulk of the crop is supplied by five contract farmers - one in Myrtleford and four between Shepparton and Swan Hill.

ONE CLEVER MACHINE

The pumpkin seeds (saved from the previous year or imported from Slovenia) are planted in early spring "after the last frost", Sharan says. They are harvested at the end of summer by a machine with a spiked wheel which picks the pumpkins from the ground. The pumpkins are then dropped into a crushing drum which pulverises them into small chunks. The seed is transferred into a compartment on the side of the harvester while the remains of the pumpkin is deposited back on to the paddock.

The collected seeds are sent to a processing plant where they are cleaned and sorted and bulk packed, then sent to the Ovens factory.

CONTINUED PAGE 24

FROM PAGE 23

"The pumpkins do well in the Swan Hill region and in the future we will have crops in other areas," Sharan says. "We see our collaboration with selected farmers as ensuring quality Australian seeds are available all year."

Sharan says the response to the pumpkin seeds and oil has been excellent.

"Customers are very interested in the health benefits of pumpkin seeds and oil and many have experienced a variety of health improvements," Sharan says.

"Pumpkin seed oil helps with male prostate disorders, kidney function, cholesterol balancing and skin health while the seeds are known for their high zinc content which is good for the immune system and there's ongoing research into the nutritional value." The seed and oil's nutty flavour enhances pasta, vegetables and salads.

THE PATH AHEAD

The business remains very much a family affair.

After relocating to Victoria, Sharan married Jay Rivett, who also grew up on a farm and is an artisan baker-chef by trade. Jay heads production in the factory and produces pumpkin seed treats which are served in the shop, which acts as a "cellar door", offering pumpkin seed and oil tastings.

As well as the factory shop, online store and a growing number of health food outlets, the family also attends farmers' markets including Bendigo, Flemington and Wodonga.

Sharan says they plan to have their own farm in the area to add to the pumpkin supply, and are adding to their product list with local hazelnuts and apricot-kernel oil.

Sharan says she is humbled by the amount of support for their pumpkin seeds. "I am very proud of where we have come from and our future - to be supporting farmers' livelihoods and people's health," she says.

"We really want to get the word out about the health benefits of pumpkin seeds and are so pleased Dad's heritage and the history of the Styrian pumpkin seeds and oil will continue on in Australia."

For more images

weeklytimesnow.com.au

Farm facts

AUSTRALIAN PUMPKIN SEED **COMPANY**

Sharan and Jay Rivett run the Australian Pumpkin Seed **Company** at Ovens.

They produce pumpkin seeds for snacks and pumpkin seed oil. They have their own small crop of Styrian pumpkins plus five contract farmers who produce the bulk of their seeds.

The pumpkin seeds are harvested, washed and dried on farm, sorted off-**site** and processed at the factory, where they also have a cafe and shop.

The Styrian pumpkin flesh is flavourless like a marrow so is unpalatable and used as organic matter or livestock feed.

Each pumpkin produces 100g of dry seed and it takes 30 pumpkins to make one litre of oil.

Pumpkin seeds are known for their abundance of nutrients including complete proteins, B vitamins, zinc, iron, magnesium and phosphorus.

The Australian Pumpkin Seed **Company** products are **sold** in shops, at farmers' markets and online.

A 250ml bottle of pumpkin seed oil costs \$25.45.

The Australian Pumpkin Seed **Company** factory, shop and cafe are at 5061 Great Alpine Rd, Ovens, between Myrtleford and Bright

pumpkinseed.net.au

IN i0 : Agriculture

NS c31 : Marketing | ccat : Corporate/Industrial News | ncat : Content Types | nfact : Factiva Filters | nfcpin : FC&E Industry News Filter

RE austr : Australia | slvnia : Slovenia | victor : Victoria (Australia) | apacz : Asia Pacific | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | balkz : Balkan States | eecz : European Union Countries | eeurz : Central/Eastern Europe | eurz : Europe | medz : Mediterranean

PUB News Ltd.

AN Document HERWEK0020140701ea720005v