# Delivering quality produce sustainably

### **By BREE SWIFT**

BRETT Heather's childhood was what most dreams are made of.

Born and growing up on Cocos (Keeling) Islands, he spent some spectacular years there as a child.

"Cocos is always in my heart," Mr Heather said.

"It's a beautiful tropical carefree paradise, a place with not a care in the world." After moving back to Roleystone in the Perth Hills for a few years, Mr Heather's

family relocated to another tropical paradise, Christmas Island, where he attended three years of secondary school.

"There we swam with Whale Sharks, caught flying fish at night with spotlights on a boat, went scuba diving in a deep blue abyss, explored the tropical rainforest and the waterfalls and had our own radio program at the local radio station," he said.

There was no detention centre on the island in those days, which is all people seem to know about Christmas Island now.

"I always had incredible surroundings of the natural world which captured my interest."

With a great passion for the outdoors and nature, it's no wonder Mr Heather gravitated towards a career in the agricultural industry.

"I always liked eating fruit and picking vegetables from the garden and was naturally inquisitive and enjoyed the challenge of making things grow," he said.

Once he finished school, Mr Heather headed straight to Curtin University to study a Bachelor of Business in Agriculture.

Hoping to spend a year abroad in the United Kingdom on a student exchange, he was told he had left things too late by the Curtin University International Office.

But in a twist of fate, one week later, Mr Heather was working at a bar at the home

of WA cricket, the WACA, when he got talking to a customer from England who happened to be the professor of Marketing Management at a small university campus in Kent, London.

"I told him I was wanting to go on exchange to the University of London campus at Wye in Kent and he just about fell over, reached into his wallet and pulled out his business card," Mr Heather said.

"His name was professor David Hughes and he said if you're keen I'll pull a few strings and get you in."

Four weeks later, Mr Heather was on a plane to the other side of the world, and unbeknownst to him, his life would never be the same

At the University of London, he met his wife Zoe and they now have two young children.

After he completed his studies, professor Hughes, or "Uncle David" as Brett calls him, helped him into his first agricultural job, based just outside of Cambridge.

Mr Heather's first senior position was as a technical manager of a company that supplied produce to the top end UK retailer, Waitrose.

In this role, he worked with more than 100 producers, procuring fruit from 20 different countries around the world.

"It enabled me to see some incredible places like the Pyramids, Jerusalem, Rome, Sicily, Patagonia and the Dominican Republic," Mr Heather said.

"It was fascinating working across so many globally competitive supply chains within the UK retail industry.

"Their retail landscape had 10 major retailers fighting to get customers into their shops to purchase their products. "The position exposed me to a world

that was all about the consumer, we needed to have the best possible eating quality on shelf – 365 days of the year. "If we weren't able to supply produce to

Waitrose for a few days it was a massive



> Alterra chairman Trevor Stoney (left), with Foothills Fresh owner Brett Heather on a recent visit to an avocado farm at Pemberton. Mr Heather was recently appointed to Alterra's executive team as chief operating and technical officer.

deal as the other retailers would likely have fruit on shelf for their customers.'

As UK consumers were becoming more concerned with climate change, Mr Heather was asked to look at solutions to reduce the carbon footprint of the produce they were procuring.

"This meant trying to bring in more fruit via sea freight from places like South Africa, Chile and Australia instead of flying the fruit over," Mr Heather said.

"A journey of 24 hours by air became a journey of up to four weeks by sea from some southern hemisphere countries."

Mr Heather said it was a tricky process, ensuring great quality of produce after 30 days on a boat from Australia.

'Europe is very strict on chemical use so there were no magical chemical wands we could use to achieve this," he said.

"Every consignment that arrived via both air freight and sea freight was tested for quality, a sample was kept and evaluated over five days to ensure it met customer expectations.

"I visited plant breeders in the US, France, South Africa and New Zealand looking at new fruit varieties that could be more easily shipped with good eating quality

"I also looked at new technologies that would help the fruit to stay fresher across these vast distances."

In that role Mr Heather took producers from different regions of the world on store visits so they could see what they were trying to achieve with customers in stores and also see what their competitors were doing.

After seven years in the UK, Mr Heather was recruited as the group technical manager for the Costa Group, Australia's biggest listed horticultural business and relocated to Melbourne, Victoria.

"It was nice to come home, the pace of life is noticeably slower than dealing with the frantic pace of brutal global retailing," Mr Heather said.



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"The UK buyers who came to Australia had a much higher expectation of quality and food safety and a big part of my role was recruiting expertise into the business and developing a greater quality focus across the groups' farms and distribution centres.

"Myself and the CEO, Harry Debney, worked on a post-harvest project which significantly improved the company's handling of produce from the point of harvest on-farm, right the way through to our retail customers of Coles, Woolworths and Aldi.

"Five of us were lucky enough to take the Visy private jet for seven days to do a post-harvest study tour in the United States, UK and Germany.

"It was an amazing trip."

After five years in Melbourne, Mr Heather finally returned to WA when he was appointed the WA manager for Costa Farms, a fruit wholesaling business which sells products to big retailers including Coles, Woolworths and Aldi, as well as independent supermarkets such as IGA.

"It was a tough business that ran six days a week from 1am in the morning to 5pm in the evening," Mr Heather said.

Looking for a change of pace, he soon accepted a role as chief executive of the Western Citrus Alliance, where he worked with a group of WA citrus growers.

"I went back to doing what I loved and worked with growers to help improve their class one yield, which is basically the amount of fruit growers can sell to Coles and Woolworths," Mr Heather said.

"Some growers had only 20 per cent class one from their orchards, which obviously means 80 per cent of their fruit didn't meet the required standards.

Mr Heather found many ways to help the citrus growers improve their profitability and gained funding from the State government's Royalties for Regions program, as well as Federal government funding to fly a specialist citrus agronomist over from Mildura, Victoria, to help local producers.

"The agronomist brought a lot of new knowledge to the group and it was a really interesting experience," he said.

"Some growers really appreciated the new practices we were able to bring, while others were a little more reluctant to change."

Mr Heather was recently appointed to agribusiness firm Alterra's executive team as chief operating and technical officer to help with investments in avocados.

He also manages his own agribusiness consulting firm, Foothills Fresh, in which he works on a diverse range of projects.

"I must say it was a bit like jumping off a cliff and not knowing whether you have a parachute on," Mr Heather said about going out on his own.

He is also consulting with Costa on their avocado project with the Macquarie Bank that has seen more than \$100 million of avocado farms purchased on Australia's east coast.

"They asked me to conduct a gap analysis of their avocado farms to map out improvements in quality and profitability to help with their vision to export and



> Mr Heather (left) visiting one of the stone fruit breeders in the South of France while working in the United Kingdom.

improve product going to their customers," he said.

Mr Heather is also working with Nutrano, a big citrus, blueberry and mango producer in the Eastern States.

"I spent some time out at their facilities in Mildura and it's amazing seeing the mighty Murray first-hand and hearing from the locals how the drought is affecting them all," Mr Heather said.

"Water is a massive issue for Australia particularly along the Murray, the food bowl of Australia."

Mr Heather told Farm Weekly that he was frustrated at the lack of response to tackle climate change as he had witnessed first-hand how farmers were suffering its full force every year.

"Increased climatic risk is having a big

impact on Australian farmers and global food producers," he said.

Reflecting on his post-horticultural experience, Mr Heather said ensuring produce was fresh, produced in a sustainable way and offered value to the consumer was key in the global supply chain.

"Post-harvest agriculture is a critical piece of a very complicated puzzle," Mr Heather said.

"Any supermarket can sell Coke, for example, but having the freshest, best eating fruit and veg every day of the year is far more challenging - not all retailers can do this well.

"Bringing the best quality product to the consumer is achieved through good science and good process within global value chains."

# Voice of the Outback

## By FLEUR MCDONALD

WALT Disney said: 'If you have a dream, you can do it.'

Have you ever had a dream that you thought was impossible to come true, because it was just that – a dream?

If you're a reader, you've probably noticed an increase in what everyone seems to be calling 'Rural Lit' novels, at the moment.

Stories of strong heroines, rural crime, with a bit of farming and subjects that affect country people thrown in.

It started off with Rachael Treasure penning her iconic novel Jillaroo (if you haven't read it, I suggest you do yourself a favour).

Soon after, Tony Parsons followed with stories of old-fashioned men and gorgeous girls, riding horses and breeding fine wool Merino sheep.

These books flew off the shelves and had print runs most authors would dream of.

Shortly after those two, both myself and another WA author, Fiona Palmer hit the scene. Now there is more than four Rural Lit books per month, being released. Great for all who love reading this

genre. I'd never given any thought to

becoming an author as a career, when I first left school. Most of the authors I used to read;

Enid Blyton, The Bronte Sisters, well, they were all dead, so it didn't seem like a great career to go into.

However, by some miracle, I happened to be in the right place at the right time, with half a novel written, and managed to land myself a publishing deal.

Crazy for a farmer and mum living in the back blocks of Esperance.

On November 5, my 14th book, Starting from Now, will make its appearance in bookshops across Australia.

It will suddenly pop up on your eReader, if you've pre-ordered it and, if you pre-ordered through one of the online bookstores and had forgotten about it, you'll end up with a surprise (nice or otherwise) in the mail, not long after publication date.

I can't tell you how sick this makes me feel.

Sick as in nervous.

Nervous as in, I'm-puttingmyself-out-for-people-to-bashmy-work, sick.

I guess that goes with being an author, but even after 10 years, it's still quite confronting for a girl who is more comfortable talking to her dog and close friends than standing in front of a crowd.

I had no idea of the opportunities my first manuscript, Red Dust would lead to.

And lead, it has; to overseas book deals, meeting people I had never would have, opening doors I never knew existed.

One of these opportunities was to take another dream I had and put it into reality.

I've wanted to help people in the RRR areas who were experiencing domestic violence.

Again, that was another 'right place at the right time' experience when I met an amazing man called Peter Fitzpatrick.

He took my dream and hauled me through the hallowed halls of Canberra, talking to politicians and finally we came out with funding to the tune of \$2.3m. Thanks, Federal Minister for Health, Greg Hunt.

The organisation, Breaking the Silence will be launching across Western Australia over the next three years and then expanding nationwide.

Now this might sound like I'm patting myself on the back, but I'm not.

I'm trying to say, that this woman, with not a lot of confidence and without a knowledge other than in things like stocking ratios, stock and pastures, has done things she never dreamed possible.

I just want to say never give up. Dare to dream. Dare to believe.

Because dreams come true to ordinary people.





as another 'right place