

A brush with Aussie potato country: bringing farmers and consumers closer

If you venture into the Coles supermarket in Melbourne's Toorak, you'll see a large format photo of a Queensland potato farm – deep rich red volcanic soil, leafy green potato plants, and rolling slopes.

It is here on the picturesque Acacia Plateau near Killarney on the Queensland-New South Wales border that Kerri Ann Lamb and her family-owned company, Wickham Farms, produce whole brushed potatoes for Coles supermarkets and peeled and packaged potatoes for healthy eating and calorie-controlled frozen meal company, Lite N' Easy.

The soil, high rainfall and mild summers are ideal growing conditions for potatoes and the day *Aussie Potatoes* visits there are young potato plants enjoying recent rainfall.

A staggered plant across spring and summer means the potato paddocks are at different stages and other paddocks sit waiting for their turn to grow this power packed wholefood.

The young plants will grow underground potato tubers for another three months before they are harvested, packaged just 15 kilometres away and distributed to Queensland supermarkets as brushed potatoes or washed, peeled and packaged for food service and food manufacturers to make into meals.

If you're looking for flavour and versatility, you can't go past brushed Sebago spuds, Kerri-Ann says.

"They are an older variety but keep them in a dark, dry place and they'll reward you with longevity and flavour," she says.

"We eat potatoes every night – unpeeled, cooked and mashed, we love them."

Kerri Ann is a fourth-generation farmer steering the family business into the future by taking an outward-looking view and keeping in touch with consumer trends and preferences.

"If you're not at one with the customer, you really don't have a business so we really just can't keep doing the same thing, the same way and expect a different result.

"We have to change with consumer demand and if that means changing varieties or changing our cut styles or changing the size or the packaging, then that's really what we need to do."

In 2019, with assistance from a Hort Innovation Nuffield Scholarship, Kerri Ann spent 16 weeks travelling to Europe, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland to look at the potato industry, including supermarkets, value-adding, packaging plants and farms.

On returning to Australia armed with new information and insights, she is now launching a new value-added product in the form of pasteurised potatoes.

The product will be cooked and cooled, allowing a particularly healthy form of fibre called resistant starch to develop. The shelf life of around 30 days and convenience of an easy-to-handle product should make it highly suitable for wholesale clients such as residential aged care.

“That gives our clients the ability to have one delivery of their potatoes a week rather than three or four deliveries,” Kerri Ann said.

“Value adding also allows them to quickly prepare potatoes by just reheating or maybe just throwing them in the oven to crisp up, mashing or even serving cold as potato salad.”

Kerri Ann is also a firm believer in communication back from the grower to the consumer and health professionals such as Accredited Practising Dietitians.

“I feel as a farmer, and a potato grower, if we don't tell our story, then someone tells the story for us,” she said.

“We want consumers to know that potatoes are really healthy; they are good for you. They are really nutritious, and they are really versatile.”

Kerri Ann says the ‘bad carb’ message has confused consumers and wants to set the record straight.

She says evidence-based scientific research shows potatoes are a high-quality carbohydrate with many nutritional benefits including as a source of potassium, folate, vitamin C and vitamin B6.

“Potatoes are very good value for money, and you can prepare them in so many ways. They can be fancy or basic so are a great way to get nutritional benefits,” she said.

Potatoes are also recognised as a sustainable crop and good for the planet, something that gives both farmers such as Wickham Farms and consumers something to hang their sustainability hats on.

They are not only delicious, nutritious and versatile, but every whole potato sold in Australia is grown in Australia – some of them in the beautiful high country of the Acacia Plateau.

For more information about the health benefits of potatoes, visit www.aussiepotatoes.com.