

# Roots of success

*The Rehbein family is a pioneer of Australia's ginger industry.*

STORY KERRYNN SUTTON PHOTOS PAUL BEUTEL

The morning is crisp and beyond the rows of ginger planted in rich red volcanic soil, the sun renders the ocean a brilliant blue. With the ginger harvest in full swing, Anthony Rehbein has started his day early, briefing his team at the farm shed. The Rehbeins employ 10 permanent staff and up to 60 casuals during peak harvest periods.

Anthony is a man on the move and has a strong work ethic. He's passionate about his industry and not afraid to stand up for what he sees as the future of sustainable agribusiness. His enthusiasm is infectious.

"It's all about the soil really," Anthony says. "When our produce comes out of the ground, it just smells so good. The south-easterly aspect of our farm means we catch the sun's first rays. We are also lucky to have great water – you couldn't ask for better growing conditions."

Anthony is the fourth generation to work this fertile soil on what is known to locals as the Sloping Hummock. He and his wife Kate own and manage Hummock Produce, a mixed horticultural farm. Together with their three children (Lilly, 14, Charlotte, 12, and Angus, 10) the family grows ginger, pumpkins, watermelons, potatoes and a small amount of sugar cane. With ocean views, the picturesque farm is minutes from the seaside village of Barga in the Bundaberg region of Queensland.

Anthony's father and grandfather began growing small crops in the 1980s to diversify away from sugar-cane production. The family had moved into growing rockmelons and potatoes by the time Anthony returned from university in 1993 to work alongside his father Rob.

By 1999 Anthony and Kate were married. They'd met at university. When Rob became very sick with cancer, the couple embraced the challenge of operating the family business.

Anthony admits it was a steep learning curve, but together they have maintained a united vision. The couple has invested time and money in strategic planning and the latest technology and equipment.

Anthony cites one of the main difficulties faced by growers in the horticultural industry as the lack of control over price.

"We have a passion for what we do, however it becomes a difficult playing field when supply and

demand dictate price," he says. "I believe the ability to differentiate quality produce is paramount."

It was this line of thinking that led Anthony and his father to plant a trial plot of ginger on the farm in early 2000, making them the first farmers in the district to grow ginger commercially. The crop is highly labour-intensive, with ginger harvested every month of the year.

"One of the biggest challenges in farming is getting 'work-life balance' and even though this is a seven-day-a-week business we still try to have weekends off," Anthony says. A key investment has been the technology that allows remote irrigation management. "I can be away from the farm and control irrigation using my phone," Anthony says. "We can also water at night, when the wind is minimal, allowing us to save water and labour – the farm keeps working while you sleep."

Watermelons are grown on the farm (in November and December) and recently television celebrity chef Adam Liaw filmed the making of chargrilled watermelon with feta and mint in the Rehbein's ginger shed for the SBS series, *Destination Flavour*.

Anthony has been the president of the Ginger Association of Australia for the past three years (stepping into the role of chairman of R&D this year). He has worked tirelessly in grower advocacy and marketing. Anthony believes that the future lies in vertical integration and the recent launch of their brand, Bunda Ginga, is part of a greater vision that will enable the differentiation of their product at the point of sale.

"We have started by branding our product boxes – we still have a long way to go before we see in-store labelling, but we hope to one day have more control over our product, including the expansion into a processing facility of our own," Anthony says. He remains exasperated by the recent importation of foreign ginger into Australian markets. "I think more and more consumers want to buy local."

With the goal of value-adding their own produce, the couple now produces ground spice and pickled ginger. "The response at the markets was overwhelming – people loved our products," Anthony says. "Dug out by hand today and in store tomorrow ... now which consumer would say no to that? We just need to tell the story."



## GINGER INDUSTRY

Australian ginger is produced only in south-east Queensland, with fresh Australian ginger available all year. The Australian ginger industry produces about 8000 tonnes a year, 40 percent of which is processed. The rest is sent to fresh markets across the country, and some exported. There are two varieties – Canton, grown for the fresh market, and Queensland ginger, used in a wide range of products, including ginger beer.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: President of the Ginger Association of Australia Anthony Rehbein with a bumper crop; Anthony and Kate Rehbein; Anthony in the rich volcanic soil.