

Down to earth

INNOVATION, diversity and a low GI spud puts Mark Labbett and his family ahead in the potato game. KATE SHARKEY* spoke to the potato farmer in Millbrook minutes after he sent off a 38 tonne consignment of potatoes to a new client in NSW.

Mark's grandfather, Ted Labbett, saw an opportunity to grow certified seed potatoes for an emerging market back in the 1920s and established Labbett Brothers. "My grandfather and his two brothers Frank and Jack were some of the first farmers to grow seed in Victoria, and the first to irrigate potatoes. They were quite the trail blazers for the industry," Mark said. "Dad and his brother took over the partnership and now it's Mum, Dad and my family."

Altitude and good climate, free draining soil and plenty of water make for near perfect growing conditions on the 150ha property at Millbrook just outside of Gordon. Ten major varieties of potatoes are grown to turn out 1500 tonnes of certified potato seed annually.

Mark and his family are one of only 25 certified seed potato growers in the central highlands district. A strict quality assurance program is in place to ensure the potatoes grown for seed meet high industry standards. An inspector checks the crop throughout the growing and harvesting phase and can spot check at any time through the grading and packing process.

"I treat my potatoes like apples," Mark said. To meet high standards seed potatoes have to be handled very carefully. The Labbetts recently invested in a new European grading machine that gently sorts the potatoes according to size requirements – seed potatoes need to measure between 35mm and 75mm. "The grading machine can sort three lines of potatoes and it's quick and very consistent. This is the way of the future for seed growers," Mark said.

Just like his father and grandfather before him, Mark is carving his own successful path in what at times can be a very fickle industry. A former Apprentice of the Year, Mark sits on the board of Seed Potatoes Victoria and shows great leadership for his local community by supporting other growers and employing locals where he can.

"We also have an apprentice, Daniel, who is doing very well and I'm proud to see him succeed," Mark said. "As a former apprentice myself I know it's a great way to learn your trade and nothing beats on-the-job training."

"The best part about growing potatoes is when it is busy. I enjoy it most when harvest gets under-



Mark Labbett operates the purpose built grading machine. Photo: Renee Robinson

way and the product is meeting specification and making clients happy," Mark said.

Mark is a testament to farmers right across the Moorabool Shire who take pride in their work. "It's no good if you don't enjoy your job. I enjoy most aspects of farming, especially growing potatoes," he said.

Mark continues to look for new opportunities and praised VicSpa for their innovative approach to trialling new varieties and looking for markets to complement them. "There are some opportunities for export and although it's not an easy road we are prepared to work with countries like Indonesia so it can be a win for everyone."

"Growing the humble spud is not always straight forward. I think sometimes people forget that most fresh produce potatoes are grown out in the elements. Weather predicts so much of what we do. Timing is everything with potato growing. Fungal disease and aphids can be a problem with seed potatoes primarily and that's all dependent on the weather. We're not chemical free, but we have reduced chemical use dramatically and use far softer, selective chemicals when recommended by our agronomist."

Integrated pest control (an environmentally sensitive way of managing pests), soil conditioning and crop rotation are common practises on the Labbett property to ensure the soil remains clean and healthy.

"Everything we do in order to grow quality potatoes has its place and when it all lines up it works well. Our product goes all over the place including Queensland and much of it to South Australia. Most of our customers are repeat clients and that's the way I like it," Mark said.

Labbett Brothers also grows some commercial potatoes that end up as fries. Mark said the poor

old chip could get a bad rap but it was often how the potato had been prepared. To prove how well the industry responds to the market Mark grows a potato variety which is low GI to meet the ever-growing requirements of the health conscious.

Mark said he does sell a small quantity of potatoes through the Gordon local store and a road side stall for the locals and tourists. "We did this to supply the public and to save them entering the property as it is not ideal to have tourists in our yard, especially when we were trying to load a truck and have forklifts and machinery driving around."

Mark likes to remain optimistic, however is under no illusions of how difficult being a primary producer can get, especially if the Australian dollar is high. "This opens the market up for countries in the northern hemisphere to dump cheap potatoes here on our domestic market. This can play havoc with the local growers and it can be incredibly hard to manage. Farmers have to often deal with instability in the industry."

Despite the many obstacles of modern day farming, Mark believes the legacy his grandfather left him will live on.

"My wife Amanda and children Mitchell and Chloe are my greatest support and with them I feel confident to continue the Labbett family tradition of growing high quality potatoes and helping my rural community to prosper."

***Kate Sharkey is establishing a Moorabool Food Producers Network.**