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—PREMIUM— Quality PRODUCE

With more than 20 years experience in the industry, Peter and Frances Bender are redefining quality and innovation in aquaculture.

Images by Peter Whyte

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- Peter Bender

Peter Bender, co-owner and Managing Director of Huon Aquaculture, started the company in 1987 with his wife, Frances, and no formal background in the industry. In 1994, Peter made ownership of the business official, buying it from his family and eventually taking the company from around 30 staff to 460–470 employees, with production of salmon nearing 15,000 tonnes this year and turnover reaching more than \$190 million.

“There are a lot of reasons for the increase that we’ve seen over the past two and a half to three years. Back then, we were exporting a lot of fish and for fairly low prices. There was a bit of a world oversupply of salmon then, whereas now the market’s grown worldwide but grown particularly well in Australia. The past three years we have had something like 28-per-cent growth for domestic

fresh sales, and this year so far it’s about 35 per cent.”

The market has changed since we last spoke with Peter, as exports for Huon have dropped from 30 per cent of sales to about 4 per cent. “The domestic market has grown very strongly, and it’s growing faster than our ability to expand in production, which means we’re not exporting very much now. The more we sell domestically, the better return we get because we obviously don’t have the air freight cost to get it to markets outside of Australia, which can be expensive, and the return here is quite good at the moment. Demand for salmon is growing quickly within Australia. Our domestic sales are pretty much everything at the moment, and that’s split between fresh and value-added, with a little bit going to retail.”

As a result, the company has placed a stronger focus on diversifying its product range with the

introduction of a new gourmet Reserve Selection line. “It’s absolutely the best of what we can produce, with all products in the range made to order and crafted by hand.” Peter says that he and his team acknowledged the growing demand for sustainable Tasmanian produce and saw an opportunity to introduce the Huon brand to a different type of consumer.

“We’ve long been seen as a gourmet producer in terms of selling our product to world-leading restaurants, but now we can communicate that directly to the consumer.” The company has also extended its dedication to achieving globally recognised standards in aquaculture to its retail arm, receiving accreditations from the British Retail Consortium. “It is considered the highest standard in the world for processing factories, and has become an important standard by which we can be easily recognised as a world-class producer of salmon.” >

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GLOBAL G.A.P.
The Global Partnership for Good Agricultural Practices



When *The CEO Magazine* talked with Peter previously, it was clear that he had a strong dedication to building his company's brand around world's best-practice initiatives. At the time, this included developing a revolutionary harvest method, which won industry awards for humane processing and innovation.

"We strive to continually improve our infrastructure and farming methods. Recently, this has included the development of a new salmon pen design which is predator proof, stopping animals both above and below the water attacking our fish, taking fish feed, or causing injury—and we've patented that design." The new design has also led to benefits beyond predator protection, with all new pens made with enclosed, flat walkways to avoid the risk of staff injuries. The \$40-million investment has seen a 90-per-cent reduction in slips, trips, and falls on all new pens which have been installed, and has already received awards for occupational health and safety innovation.

The design not only improves Huon Aquaculture's environmental standards but has significant benefits for farm operations. "It enables us to use two very strong, lightweight nets. We're using a new material for salmon, a Dyneema-type material, which is the same as you'd use in making bulletproof vests, so it's very strong and very lightweight. The technology that has enabled us to do this is the use of underwater net cleaners, which we're actually importing from Norway. It's a new technology that allows us to clean the nets on pens, whereas previously we would have to take the nets off, which made it very difficult to keep one net clean, let alone two.

"We're looking at not only expanding but trying to get a lot more efficient at what we do. Basically, we're looking at moving a lot of our leases where we grow our fish into more open, exposed, deeper water."

- Peter Bender

"When you expand and evolve, you need to apply your approach to every part of the business. So when we develop new technologies, we make sure that they help every area of production become as advanced as it can be." This includes building a new smokehouse and product centre in the north of Tasmania, which will not only be world class in regard to standards and technology but will centralise all of the company's production in the state and provide better support on the back of the growing domestic market.

"We achieved another accreditation called Global GAP. It is a farming accreditation which looks at every aspect of how we farm the fish, what records we keep, our environmental records, and fish welfare. It just goes from start to finish, from the hatchery to when we harvest the fish." Peter believes that it is this holistic approach to quality and standards, which stretches across both farm operations and processing, has been a driving force in increased demand for his product.

As the demand for salmon has risen rapidly, Huon is looking at ways of addressing it both domestically and internationally. "We're looking at not only expanding, but trying to get a lot more efficient at what we do. Basically, we're looking at moving a lot of our leases where we grow our fish into more open, exposed, deeper water. This includes building larger pens that will hold around 600 tonnes of fish.

"In doing that, we'll actually lower the stocking density of fish because these new pens will have about three times the volume, but we're only going to go for about double the biomass in the pen, bringing the stocking density down and creating a more healthy environment for the fish. We'll be closing down our more inshore sites. We need to expand quite a bit, which means looking at a 15-per-cent cumulative growth over the next five years. Projections suggest by 2020 we'll reach about 30,000 tonnes of fish produced per year.

"Our message through all these changes and which underpins our controlled growth strategy is that you really do get out what you put in. The investments associated with the strategy total \$160 million, and everything we invest in is assessed for outcomes relating to farm operations, fish health, environmental standards, employee safety, and the quality of the end product."

Investments planned for the future include bringing into the farm operations a well-boat from Norway that is approximately 75 metres in length and will be able to streamline a variety of on-water tasks, making multiple farm operations more efficient.

Peter, Frances, and their company are known around the world for maintaining the grassroots approach begun in 1987 regardless of how big the company becomes. "Our passion is fish farming, so we will always ensure we're doing it to the highest standard and developing the best technology to enrich Huon Aquaculture and the sector." ●



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