

Life is a bowl of cherries

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SIMON AND SUSAN CORNISH



I'M NOT SURE IF IT IS THE WINDING ROADS OR THE HOPEFUL anticipation that makes a visit to a cherry orchard in the Adelaide Hills on the first day of spring an adventure. Like well-seasoned actors hovering just off stage, these majestic trees are about to have their moment in the spotlight, and the producers, directors and even an audience are hoping for a perfect performance. Rain, hail, wind – even an overcast night – can prove dangerous to the life of a cherry, and the ride from budburst to matured fruit is rocky. And yet the families that build their lives around this delicate member of the rose family are united in their enthusiasm, and are planting more and more trees.

There are about 120 cherry farmers in South Australia, all holding their breath between the months of September and December. While some fruit is imported from the United States as early as June, cherries are still perceived as seasonal and thought of as a Christmas fruit. Traditionally, Riverland trees are the first to blossom; the pink and white flowers then spread throughout the Adelaide Hills until finally the orchards in the south-east emerge out of their deep winter sleep.

For growers, the cherry season commences while the trees are almost dormant through the winter months. The branches are bare

but their roots continue to slowly grow. A short, intense period of budburst is followed by full blossom. The cherries then take six to seven weeks to reach maturity. An orchard will usually contain many varieties of fruits ripening at different stages. Trees are generally four to five years old before they bear fruit, and depending on variety, landscape, history and trends of the day, can be grown in quite different ways. No two orchards are the same and, as with all farming, it's a constantly evolving process.

Even in the middle of winter, the Kenton Valley Orchard at Gumeracha is a blaze of colour; each of the Cornish family's 14,000 cherry trees is laced with metres of coloured twine. Simon and Susan Cornish began planting cherry trees when they were courting, 12 years ago. Together with Simon's brother Craig, they planted every one by hand. "No, by feet actually," laughs Susan. "We don't pat them in with our hands any more. It is too hard." They now have 25 hectares under cherries and harvest more than 14 varieties, exporting the bulk of the crop to Singapore. Their trees are laced up so they look like festive telegraph poles. The technical name for this approach is "The Lenswood Tie Down System", but after 10 years of using the system Simon has "other names" for it. It's not a popular method of growing cherries, as it is so labour

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By Simon Bishop



DOUG BISHOP



intensive, and Simon says their take on this system is rather radical. "We have taken it to the extreme," he says. The theory behind the system is that the string pulls the limbs of the tree horizontally, causing the tree to bear fruit earlier and present the fruit to the picker, making harvesting easier.

Cherry farming is an amazing undertaking for a few frantic weeks of the year and it would seem anything that can make life easier is worth the investment. During harvest, Kenton Valley may have up to 100 pickers and packers, not including a loyal team of family and friends who pitch in. Craig, a cabinetmaker in his other life, manages the orchard; Simon supervises the packing shed and Susan is in charge of the shed door sales. The 10 per cent of cherries not exported are sold simply as fruit or gloriously preserved in jams, sauces and chutneys. "I come from a background where we made use of whatever product we had around," says Susan. She and her team of helpers have cherry pie making days, and these are also available during the summer holidays. Simon concedes that his father, who grazed sheep and cattle and farmed potatoes on this same piece of land, was initially sceptical. "He is now pleased with what Craig and I have done, and always participates wherever he can," says Simon.

While the Cornish property has had many incarnations over the years, Doug Bishop's *Tetratheca* at Basket Range has been a cherry orchard since 1881. Doug has worked on the property his whole life, save four and a half years in the Army, and at 82 is still out in the orchard at 7.30am most days. Doug and his son Douglas, a lawyer in Sydney, now own the property. "I worked for my father for 40 years for nothing and now I work for my son for nothing," Doug says with a laugh. Doug and his farm manager Jason maintain more than 6000 cherry trees and graze Murray Grey cattle over their steep 140 hectares. In the "good old days", Doug's family exported fruit and the property supported four families, but the Black Sunday fire of 1955 wiped out most of the orchard.

Doug can remember the fire. It went over the top of his property on January 2, scorching the fruit hanging on the trees. It was during harvest and, while no houses or lives were lost, the fire devastated the orchard as a business. But the family persevered, planting apple trees and some of the "newer, more popular" varieties of cherries that are smaller and more bush-like than their ancestors. One of the original trees remains on the property, and Doug fondly remembers as a teenager the challenge was to pick cherries from the tallest branches. With apples

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ALAN AND MERAWYN MAYNE



harvested at Easter and cherries at Christmas, Doug grew up knowing holidays were busy times. "But I loved it and have never had any burning desire to do anything else."

Up an ever-winding road, Alan and Merawyn Mayne have a slightly different operation at Stella Creek Orchard, Forest Range. While the Maynes have only been in residence since December 2001, 1800 of their trees have been growing under permanent netting since 1986. With new plantings and continual replacement of old trees, they have expanded the orchard to 2700 trees. They sell cherries through local and interstate agents and from their shed door, and theirs is one of the few orchards that allow people to pick their own cherries. Five years ago they were self-confessed "total greenhorns" who knew nothing about farming, let alone cherry farming. Alan, with a background in economics and marketing, had always worked out of an office. Merawyn, who had raised their three children, worked as a schoolteacher, for charities and as an event co-ordinator, was just getting used to life in a townhouse in Norwood when their adult daughter Melinda spotted the property in the paper. She came to them and said: "I have found this lovely property in the Hills, you'll love it. By the way, it has got some cherry trees."

Two visits to the property, one at night in the fog and rain, were enough to convince the family this was an adventure worth trying. "We went straight into harvest and Christmas lunch." Fortunately, a neighbour offered to do their fruit picking and packing in the first year. Alan managed the orchard in the second year, and by the third year they were doing everything themselves.

Stella Creek's operation is still small enough that Alan and Merawyn get to know the backpackers, students and even families who return each year to help them with the harvest. "One couple travel all around Australia picking fruit. They are in their 50s and have raised three children in the process. Husband and wife stand opposite each other on either side of the tree and talk continuously in quiet tones. They love it." So do the Maynes' grandchildren and friends who come to soak up the peace, before they are given a job.

When she is not managing the packing shed, Merawyn's passion is the garden, and she is also propagating hedging plants. Alan's happy that his office is now an orchard. "The satisfying tiredness at the end of the day is hard to beat," he says. "I have always been looking for something that was right for me, and now I've found it."

