

# Hibiscus mini-bouquet bubbles

SHOW stoppers and conversation starters in the same mouthful, Wild Hibiscus Flowers are the consuming passion of Lee Etherington's Kurrajong Native Foods enterprise. Hibiscus flowers will generate 90 per cent of sales in a come-by-chance niche business now fizzing overtime to triple production by year's end, to meet both domestic and export demand.

**RON AGGS**  
Camden

tries but for this product, one special Australian variety is best. One main grower and several sub contracted back ups, mainly in the tropical climes of South East Queensland, can produce three kilograms of flowers per plant.

In the coming season, Kurrajong Native Foods has contracts to buy and package 9-10 tonnes of flowers.

Can hibiscus flowers make it in its main export market, the UK, the way Fosters did? The current rate is 500 jars a month.

Domestically, the best market, Western Australia is "out of control" thanks to Sandgroppers' partiality to champagne and the only promotion required is word of mouth.

Northern NSW, Sydney and Queensland are going well but there has been no real exposure yet in Melbourne. Mr Etherington uses only two distributors throughout Australia, which so far, he says "is paying off".

Preferring control over all facets of the business, he can also now afford to fund the gearing up of his own packaging equipment to eliminate the middleman.

Presently the packaging, four containers of bottles a year, comes from China and the United States.

Increasing prices for flowers and freight are a challenge to producing a luxury item (a small jar retails for \$10 and a large \$14-15) but the demand is overshadowing the impediments and within 18 months Mr Etherington will want to be out

of his East Kurrajong kitchen and into a purpose built factory.

He is also contemplating separating the branding of the hibiscus flowers, splitting off the other products which he also started on the Kurrajong Native Foods label, like lily, quandong and Davidson's plum jams, macadamia nut butter, spices, lemon and aniseed myrtle and bush tomato relish.

Like so many great ideas, this boom business evolved by coincidence.

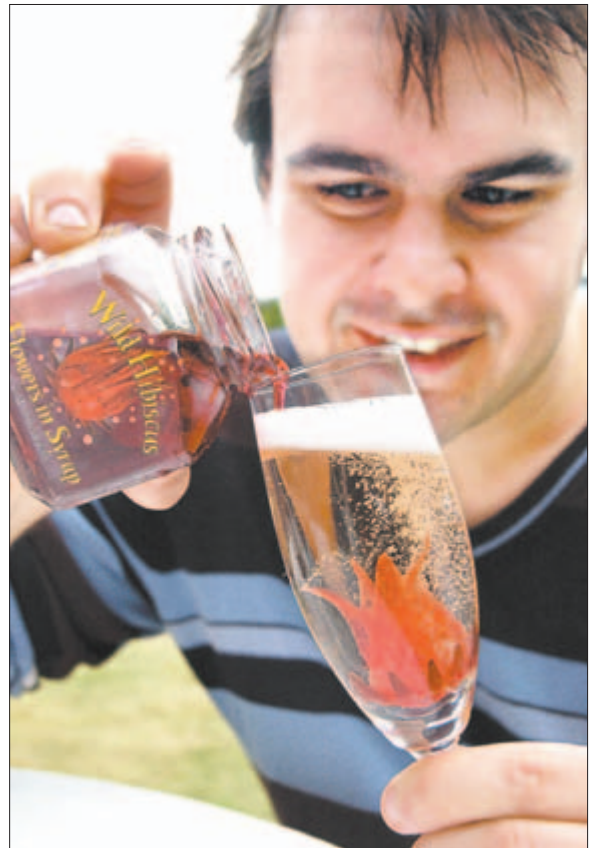
"I never intended to start a food company," said Mr Etherington, a foundation member of Hawkesbury Harvest.

To please tourists on Blue Mountains adventure tours he used to guide, he was originally looking for the perfect full-day picnic hamper menu. The hibiscus flower suggested itself as a glace fruit but Lee's love of both champagne and the shape of the flower inevitably brought the two together.

Within months he was bringing bottles of champagne to special dinner party tours and selling 15 jars of flowers each time.

■ Contact Lee Etherington, 8883 3955, or wow@bushtuckershops.com

**RIGHT:** A wild hibiscus flower champagne garnish sinks into a flute with eloquence that the optional strawberry lacks. Lee Etherington's Kurrajong Native Foods is fizzing overtime to triple production by year's end, to meet both domestic and export demand.



This crimson, love-generating champagne garnish sinks into a flute with gracious eloquence that the optional strawberry lacks: "Uprooted and washed, I've now been dunked in here, classy touch," says the strawberry.

The hibiscus says "I evolved to the most vibrant aquatic dream to give extra life, light and taste to every bubble."

And that's before you spoon in a dawn blush of hibiscus syrup that adds no sickly taint to the mix. Au contraire! From this tiny rose-gilt aquarium, the hibiscus flower, like the strawberry, can be eaten as the final mouthful.

"People bounce with excitement the first few times they have it," says Mr Etherington, explaining a microcosm of culture and recounting happy party scenarios he has witnessed first hand.

Downing the aperitif is seductively easy. Production is complicated. There are 13 secretive stages from fresh flower to champagne glass.

"Research is constant to select for colour, shape and size," says Mr Etherington. However, he needs more access to research and research facilities.

Hibiscus is grown in many coun-

# Add value at the cellar door to coax tourists

HOLY wine alone is very nice but it leaves a more contented glow in the company of a few loaves, fish, a bed for the night and other non-wine products.

Sales at the cellar door that value-add are the key to business at one of the oldest in wineries in NSW.

Visitors to Tizzana winery at Ebenezer in north western Sydney travelling the Farm Gate Trail, can sit down to a five course "dinner with the winemaker" in a feast that matches local produce to selected wines, then in the morning leave with a box of wine, glasses, other memorabilia or treats like apricots, prunes or figs preserved in white port or olives.

"Wine sales alone won't sustain

business because in total sales we cannot compete with big operators," says winemaker Peter Auld.

Mr Auld, wife Carolyn and son Jonathan, who target couples for stay overs in the five star, two-room accommodation, hope wine tourism, promoted by organisations like Tourism NSW will take off in the next few years.

They know that in their case, smallness is what gives the winery its individuality and creates beauty in the tastes they squeeze from a number of grapes varieties.

For instance, an Aleatico ("holy wine") grown with prayers but no rain during the drought year of 2003, has markedly different colour and taste to the preceding 2002 bottling, also a drought

afflicted year which reaped just a little moisture from above. Amen.

Aleatico was one of the varieties Dr Thomas Fiaschi brought to Australia from his native Tuscany.

Before planting vines at the site in 1882, then building Tizzana from 1887, he had set the Sydney gossips ablaze by marrying a nun a few years prior.

Only Tizzana, plus the original Fiaschi property in Mudgee and a Queensland winery were known to bottle Aleatico. However, All Saints (owned by Brown Brothers) has purchased a crop from Mudgee; there is a renaissance now in Australia of Italian varieties, which offer different flavours to the traditional French varieties that historically provid-

ed the base for the Australian industry.

Tizzana also process grapes for other growers in the region who want to establish their own cellar or have a rural lifestyle with wine grapes as a main interest.

Tizzana is one of nine wineries in the Sydney Basin that grow their own grapes and the Aulds, particularly Jonathan, have led the development of the Sydney Wine Trail between Wiseman's Ferry in the north and Camden in the south.

There are 26 other vineyards that grow but do not complete the full process and have their wines bottled for them. Three vineyards on the Sydney Wine Trail are also members of Hawkesbury Harvest

and appear on the Farm Gate Trail map.

Visitors to Tizzana are also invited when the season comes around to help harvest the grapes and the response is always enthusiastic.

Olives also supplement the Tizzana product line; eight acres are under cultivation and initially the Aulds tried three different varieties for eating and making oil.

The oil varieties taste sweeter when processed because of their higher oil content.

They later planted additional varieties better suited to oil making.

■ Contact Peter, Carolyn and Jonathan Auld, 4579 1150, or enquiries@tizzana.com.au

- RON AGGS



Tizzana winemakers Peter and Jonathan Auld promote their wine by offering a high class accommodation and winery tour package with other "cellar door" sales.

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