

# A venture choc full of confidence



Two novices are producing world-acclaimed chocolate, writes **SARAH HUDSON**

CADBURY cannot do it and neither can Lindt or even Haigh's.

In fact there are few places in the world where chocolate bars are produced on the same ground as the cocoa beans are grown.

According to Lynn and Chris Jahnke, there's a farm in Hawaii that does it; and, since 2014, the couple's 160ha property at Mt Edna in Far North Queensland has joined the elite global group of tree-to-bar chocolate producers.

"From our first harvest in 2014 we made 50 bars of chocolate from 50 pods, and we gave limited edition numbers to each one of them," Lynn says.

"We sent some to the Royal Melbourne Fine Food Awards and I got a phone call from them saying the bars had won a gold and two silver. I was gobsmacked."

In October, the Jahnkes secured their elite global status when they were named as one of the 18 winners in the 2017 International Cocoa Awards in Paris, putting the tiny Australian industry alongside the world's premier cocoa growing regions.

More impressive still, is the fact the Jahnkes had zero agricultural knowledge before starting their Australian Chocolate Pty Ltd, with 2500 seed pods, and building their Charley's Chocolate Factory brand, which now yields 1200kg of dry cocoa beans annually (rising to 4000kg by next year) and 500 80g bars per week in 10 varieties.

## PARTY CENTRAL

LYNN and Chris both had careers retail and marketing and were running their own party plan business in Melbourne.

After holidaying in Far North Queensland for a decade, in 2002 they bought the 160ha former banana farm at Mt Edna, pulling out the banana trees and initially run-

## LYNN AND CHRIS JAHNKE MT EDNA, QUEENSLAND

**GROW** cocoa beans on 160ha former banana farm  
**ONE** of just a few tree-to-bar chocolate producers in the world  
**YIELD** 1200kg of dry cocoa beans annually  
**THE** beans are used to produce 500 80g chocolate bars a week



ning about 200 Brahman cattle as a side income.

It was in 2013 that the couple began exploring farming options, looking at tropical plants, such as lychees, paw-paw and macadamia, realising these all took too long to fruit.

After seeing a program on ABC's *Landline* about cocoa, they approached the Rural Industries Research and Development Council, as well as tropical fruit growers, and zeroed in on chocolate.

"We had 13 boxes that needed to be ticked and cocoa ticked them all," the 65-year-old says.

"The business had to be able to grow bigger, it had to have a minimal environmental impact, have a high net profit, not be a commodity, be a product where we weren't price takers, be highly desirable and not overly subject to economic cycles."

The one disadvantage, she says, is that with 70 per cent of the world's cocoa beans sourced from West Africa — where labour is cheap — they have had to work smarter to create a product commanding a higher price.



## SEEDS OF SUCCESS

HAVING done their research, in November 2012 the couple sourced 2500 seeds from Papua New Guinea.

The seeds were planted in sterile compost mix in black plastic pots in their shade cloth nursery (which measures about 300sq m), with about 1000 planted out in March 2013 in mounds in the soil, and the remaining plants sowed in

the following November on a 1ha plot. With Far North Queensland experiencing devastating cyclones in recent years, the couple felt they had no choice but to use a trellis system for production, erecting 27km of wire on an open Tatura trellis system. Since planting, it has been trial and error in understanding the plants' growth needs.

Any pruning clippings are

applied back to the ground, acting as a compost.

Despite receiving an average annual rainfall of 3.5 metres, the cocoa plants still receive a mix of spray and drip irrigation from bore water during the dry season.

In addition, fertiliser is added to the mainly clay loam soil "little and often" to counter the leaching of the soil due to the high rainfall.

**Growing passion:** Lyn and Chris Jahnke show cocoa pods grown on their property at Mt Edna.  
Picture: STEWART McLEAN

About 14 months after planting the seeds, the Jahnkes had their first crop of 50 pods, which increased to 300kg of dry cocoa beans in 2015 and 1200kg last year.

## HARVEST BOUNTY

THERE are two peak harvest periods — October to January and April to June.

Once pods are taken off trees they are fermented in the on-farm shed in wooden boxes to a temperature of 49C, using wild yeasts.

Once the temperature drops, the beans are then sun-dried for about six days.

Beans are then roasted in a 2kg coffee roaster in a rented nearby commercial kitchen, then cracked open and winnowed to separate nibs from the shells.

Conching sees nibs placed in a melanger for up to 48 hours, where they are ground, before being tempered or stabilised — heated and cooled — by machine.

The chocolate is poured into moulds and refrigerated at 12C before being unmoulded, packaged and sold. Charley's Chocolate Factory creates 10 varieties of chocolate in 80kg base bars including single origin, dark chocolate-plus with additions such as macadamia, rum and raisin, nibs and ginger.

Current production is 600 bars a week, which will be increased to 2500 a week by the end of this year with the introduction of their own commercial kitchen.

To meet demand, they also import cocoa from Pacific Islands, with about 35 per cent going into their single origin bars, and up to 65 per cent of other bars. And they source from local Far North Queensland cocoa bean growers too.

Chris and Lynn understand the allure of chocolate to the public and so run tours of the farm. Looking ahead they have 10,000 plants in their nursery awaiting planting on to a further 10ha.



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