



ViBeri

words: annie studholme images: annie studholme & supplied

A South Canterbury couple with a passion for producing quality, healthy, pure certified organic, artisan products is behind a small business capitalising on the superfood powers of the humble blackcurrant.

BLACKCURRANTS HAVE LONG BEEN rumoured to contain medicinal properties. For centuries, they have been used to treat everything from arthritis, liver disease, kidney stones, gout, inflammation of the mouth, stomach and bowel disorders, to lung ailments, fatigue, and even used as a diuretic. But it's only recently that scientists have begun to seriously investigate the healing and protective powers of this remarkable, tiny fruit. And the results are astounding.

New research confirms blackcurrants are indeed a

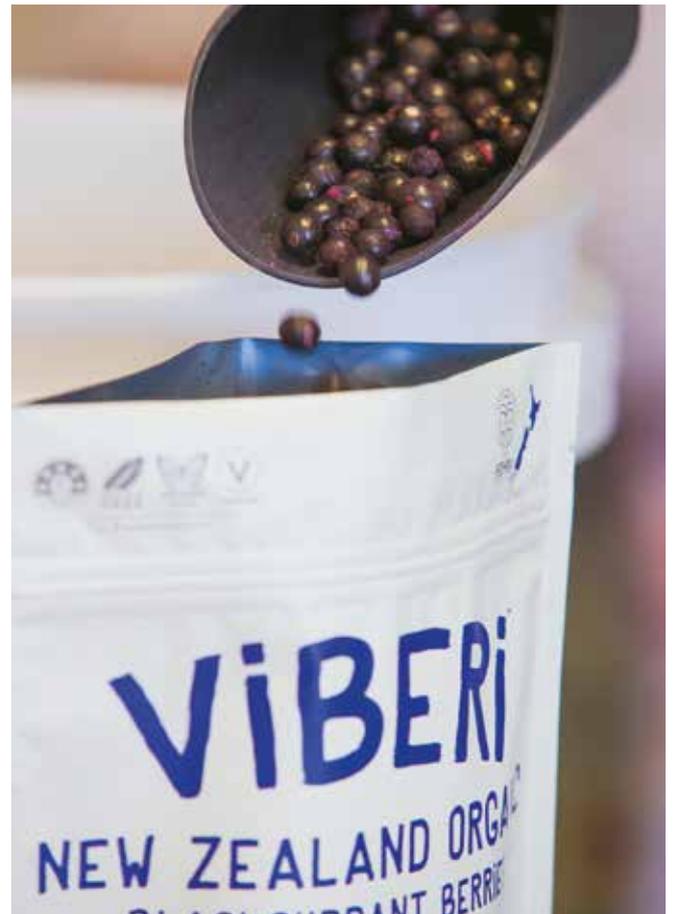
superfood. They not only contain extraordinary levels of Vitamin C and potassium, but have an impressive amount of one of nature's most powerful antioxidants, anthocyanins, responsible for the berry's rich purple colour, which has been shown to have a positive effect on muscle recovery and enhancing sport performance. And what's more, New Zealand-grown blackcurrants contain more antioxidants than our European counterparts due to growing conditions and different varieties.

Blackcurrants have also been shown to help maintain optimal eye health, and are believed to improve blood circulation and reduce inflammation. Scientists at Plant & Food Research (New Zealand) in collaboration with Northumbria University (UK), have shown compounds found in New Zealand blackcurrants increased mental performance indicators, such as accuracy, attention and mood, memory, and helps in the prevention of Parkinson's disease.

This news is music to the ears of Pleasant Point blackcurrant growers Tony and Afsaneh Howey, who have sunk considerable time, money and resources into developing ViBeri, a unique range of health food products created from their own home-grown blackcurrants.

"It's really exciting for us. There are so many good things about blackcurrants and there's much more to come. They are simply an amazing natural product and we want everyone to be able to experience their benefits," says Tony.

ViBeri has grown exponentially with its sales increasing year-on-year since its launch in 2011. Today, its certified organic, gluten free, vegan, snap frozen products containing no GMO, preservatives or additives can be found in selected health food stores and supermarkets nationwide, and, on the back of strong growth in the organic and natural food sector internationally, exports orders are now coming in.



OPPOSITE: Tony and Afsaneh Howey are as passionate about blackcurrants as they are about their business.

Above: Jam-packed full of vitality and vitamins, shelf-stable freeze-dried blackcurrants are perfect for adding to cereals, smoothies and salads and are great for baking.

Below: Blackcurrant harvest happens annually from late December through to the end of January.





Above: Mowing between the rows of blackcurrants.

Below: Hand-sorting blackcurrants for size is one of a host of measures ViBeri has in place to ensure quality.



But while ViBeri is starting to gain traction in the New Zealand market, it still has a long way to go, explains Tony. “It’s taken a huge investment to get to this point and we haven’t recovered that yet. It needs to start generating a profit. While it’s nice to be making nice, healthy food, at the end of the day it still has to be profitable. And although we can see that in time it will be, we’re just not at that point yet.”

Admittedly, the Howays had no idea just how involved the business was going to become when they embarked on the journey. It all started twelve years ago when they purchased 72 hectares on the outskirts of Pleasant Point, which was already planted in blackcurrants. Having had more than 30 years of experience under the Alpine Fresh banner growing other vegetable and arable crops, making the leap to growing blackcurrants, didn’t seem like a stretch too far, but they had a lot to learn. “Growing blackcurrants is very different from growing a vegetable or seed crop. There is a lot more to it,” says Tony.

From the outset, it became abundantly clear to the Howays that there was no future in growing blackcurrants conventionally. They needed to find some way to add value.

It got them thinking. With few firm contracts in place, they started to explore different possibilities. Word about the health benefits of blackcurrants was on the rise and growing concerns in different global markets surrounding various contamination scares, led the Howays to be certain the future of blackcurrants was intrinsically linked to its health properties.



Above: Blackcurrants are now widely regarded as a superfood.
Below: Farm manager Steve Harvey creating ViBeri's famed dark chocolate covered blackcurrants.

Even though their previous experience was on producing raw bulk material, usually for large international food companies, where prices were dictated and they had no real connection with the end consumer, they were committed to doing something together and favoured the idea of taking a product all the way through. Not only did it give them control of the entire process, from growing the blackcurrants to marketing, but it meant they could personally guarantee customer quality.

“It was important to us. Right from making sure we’re growing and using the very best fruit, to overseeing product creation that customers see in store and enjoy at home, we

know there’s no compromise on quality,” says Tony.

They knew their success ultimately hinged on becoming certified organic, which in itself presented a whole new set of challenges. Growing blackcurrants on a commercial scale is a precise science, and trying to do it organically makes an already hard task even harder, he explains.

Without being able to use pesticides and herbicides on their orchard, weed control becomes a huge problem, especially when establishing new crops. Maintaining fertility is also a problem and crop yields are severely reduced. In addition, they’re not immune to late frosts or hail storms wiping out their entire crop.



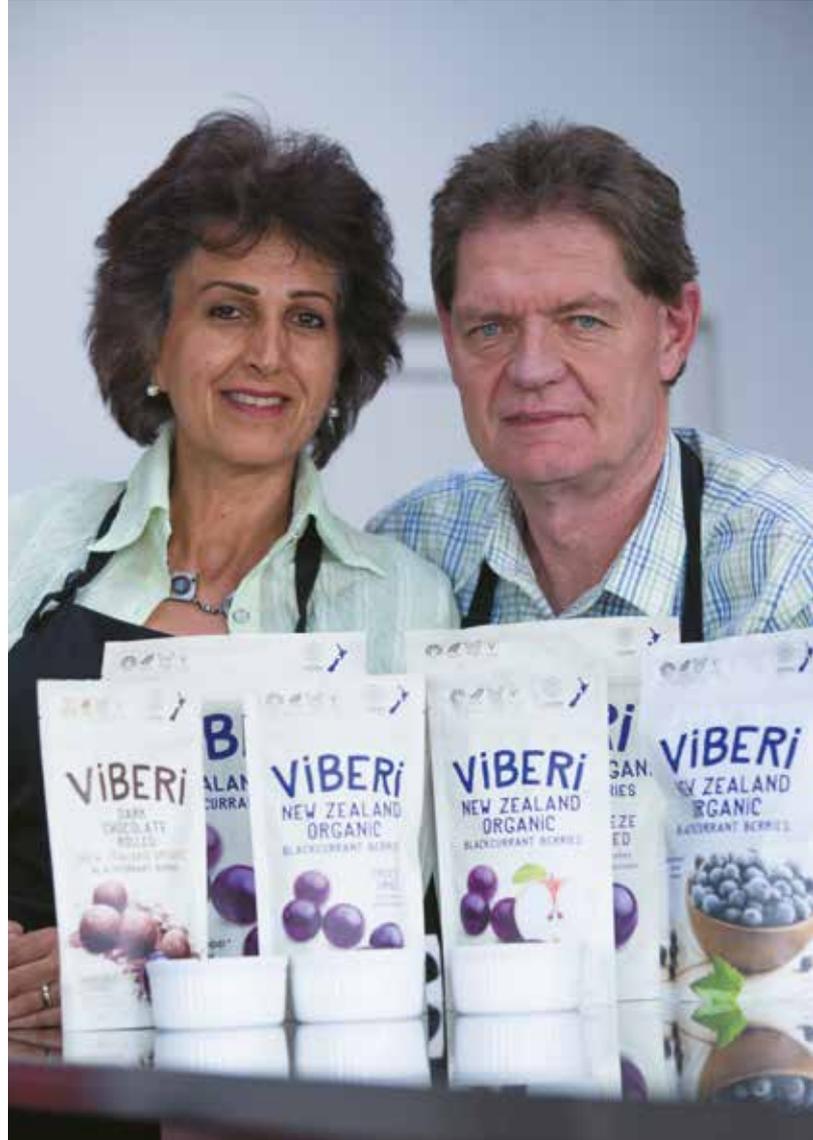
Tony and Afsaneh started off slowly, converting one small block of blackcurrants at a time to certified organic. Because no one else was doing it on such a large scale in New Zealand, they spent a great deal of time researching, trialling and adapting agronomy methods to find out what worked.

It took them six long years, exorbitant certification costs and onerous audit requirements to complete the process, with this being the first year where their entire production is fully certified organic. Being fully certified not only means they can't use pesticides and herbicides, it also means no preservatives or additives can be used across the entire ViBeri range.

Because every country's "organic" policy differs, the couple shrewdly looked outside New Zealand, setting very high standards from the beginning. "We have tried to keep it healthy at all costs. Simply because there are so many unhealthy products out there, we really wanted to produce one where there are no numbers on the back of the packet," explains Afsaneh.

Once the berries are harvested, which takes place from late December through to the end of January annually, they are all Independently Quick Frozen (IQF), giving them the flexibility to make exactly what's required.

Initially Tony and Afsaneh relied on sales from IQF and concentrate before they developed the full ViBeri range, which includes snap frozen, shelf-stable freeze-dried, soft-dried and dark chocolate covered. "We were trying to create something that people can use every day and get the health benefits from. We also knew we needed more than one product if we were going to export and while frozen was great for the domestic market, it was problematic for overseas because we are such a long way from our markets," says Afsaneh.



Above: ViBeri now has an extensive range, with Tony and Afsaneh Howey confidently looking forward to the future.

Below: Irrigation helps to ensure a bumper blackcurrant crop.



Freeze-drying, a process where blackcurrants are rapidly frozen and then subjected to a high vacuum removing ice by sublimation, proved the answer. It not only made them light and easy to transport, but gave them a long shelf life for export. Perfect for adding to cereals, smoothies or salads, and great for baking, each freeze-dried blackcurrant is an intense burst of flavour, jam-packed full of vitality and vitamins.

The Howeys then set about masterfully creating their dark chocolate-rolled berries, which uses the highest grade organic dark Belgian chocolate, utilising the expertise from master chocolatiers, She Universe in Governor's Bay. The result is a mind-blowing hit of delectable Belgian chocolate followed by a crunchy and juicy tart center. Lastly, they introduced a luscious soft dried berry infused with organic apple juice and organic olive oil to keep them from sticking.

Over the past 18 months, the Howeys have propelled into overdrive with the release of their stylish new packaging in December 2014, and completion of a new purpose-built operation on Butlers Road. Substantial investment has also gone into the chocolate rolling equipment and the \$120,000 colour sorter.

But perhaps the biggest cost had been ensuring they have at least 12 months of stock on hand in case of a total crop failure. "We are very mindful that if we got a hail storm it could wipe out our entire crop." It goes back to remaining true to our brand, which is around integrity, health and pure organic food, explains Tony. "Our products rely on New Zealand organic blackcurrants meaning we simply can't source them from elsewhere. No blackcurrants; no product."

With so much money and time invested, it's hardly surprising that Tony and Afsaneh have taken to the road themselves to market their products, concentrating on establishing invaluable customer relationships. They have spent countless hours attending food shows and doing tastings up and down the country. Their passion is undeniable, and it's paying dividends.

"It's exciting to see people's reactions. People are looking for wholefoods and something that's good for them, but tastes great. There really is no comparison when you take into account the health benefits and the flavour. It gives us a great feeling to know we are on the right track," says Afsaneh. "We are selling something that we really believe in. We have a passion for what we have created and I think the customer picks up on that. And now with the science to back it up, people know it's not just us saying it."

With rapid sales growth all the signs point to a promising future for ViBeri. ■

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