

THE AUSTRALIAN

Sunny Ridge a strawberry saga

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Mat and Ruth Gallace on their farm at Main Ridge. Picture: Zoe Phillips Source: HWT Image Library

STRAWBERRY season has sprung in Victoria, NSW, Tasmania and South Australia. In Queensland and Western Australia, they're picked year-round, but there's something about seasonal fruit. In Victoria, Mornington Peninsula (milder than the Yarra, nearer to the ocean) is one of the earliest regions. Sunny Ridge Farm (at Main Ridge) has a strawberry saga.

Mick Gallace tells me his father (who migrated from Italy) "had a love of rabbit hunting". A friend had an old farmhouse on the peninsula, where they came on weekends for the rabbits. Gallace's dad loved the area so much, he eventually bought the farm.

They had cows, cherries, apples and a few strawberries planted between the trees.

In the 1960s, Gallace's dad took his daughter back to Italy "to find a husband", leaving young Mick in charge. "It was a good opportunity for me to strike," he says.

"We were much better at growing strawberries than cherries. The soil and cool maritime climate of the peninsula is just ideal for berries." The fruit trees had to go. Gallace recalls the "worried grin" on his father's face "when he came back and saw what we'd done".

Sunny Ridge strawberries (mainly albion) now grow at Boneo and Main Ridge (on Mornington), in the Yarra Valley, and at Caboolture, Queensland (for the year-round supply).

Meanwhile, Gallace's son, Matt, and his wife, Ruth, have developed his sideline into a full-fledged business, making berry-based ciders, sparkling wine and liqueur (Rubello Wines). They bring the wines and Sunny Ridge strawberries to Veg Out St Kilda (first Saturday of the month, 8.30am-1pm, Peanut Farm Reserve, Chaucer St) and Kingston Farmers Market (first Saturday, 8am-12.30, Nepean Highway and Bay Street, Highett, Victoria). (Other weekends at Flemington, Mornington and Mountt Eliza

markets.)

At Mooraduc (Mornington shire), Benny D'Angelo grows Benny's Berries. Daughter Maria tells me their story. At 18, D'Angel migrated from Italy. Coming from a farm (cattle and sheep at Molise, near Abruzzo), he hankered to get back on the land and, when he could, bought 5ha at Mooraduc, where Maria grew up.

They had cattle and a couple of horses and "we used to visit friends who grew berries", she says. Her dad thought he'd have a go. That was 35 years ago. They pick from mid-October right up to June, with "little lulls" in between; mainly albion, "tasty and kind of crunchy, beautiful colour and quite large but full of flavour".

Maria takes care of market business and makes jams: strawberry, raspberry, blackberry (all natural, all winners at the 2011 Royal Melbourne Fine Food Awards).

Tomorrow, Maria will be at Hurstbridge Farmers Market (first Sunday, 8.30am-1pm, Fergusons Paddock, Arthurs Creek Road) and Melbourne's Mulgrave Farmers Market (Sundays, 8am-1pm, Wellington and Jacksons roads).

FIELDWORK, SOUTH AUSTRALIA: Commercial jam-maker Beerenberg opens its Adelaide Hills strawberry farm at Hahndorf during picking season; \$3 entry (under-13s free); pick and buy strawberries for \$9.50 a kilogram.

HOMEWORK: Elisabeth Luard's fruit syrups come from Scandinavia and central Europe: Infuse 2.5kg strawberries with juice of 2 lemons and 1.2 litres cold water, 24 hours in a cool place. Strain through cloth; boil with sugar (500g for 600ml juice), skim and bottle (European Peasant Cookery, Bantam Press, 1986).

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