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FRUIT & VEGETABLE news



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Achacha fruit brings a **TASTE OF BOLIVIA** to north Queensland



Bruce & Helen Hill
Achacha Fruit Plantations
● Palm Creek, Qld

Despite their trees having been planted for over a decade Bruce Hill still gets odd looks from consumers, wondering what he, his wife Helen and their friends are growing on their Palm Creek Plantation in north Queensland.

"I have been going to the farmers markets here in Townsville every Sunday for three years now, and every Sunday there are groups of people who ask what the fruit is and where it comes from," Bruce said.

Located midway between Townsville and Ayr on the Bruce Highway, the 120 hectare farm is the first, and currently the only known, large scale commercial achacha operation in the world with 16 000 fruiting trees.

The achacha, or as it is natively known the achachairú, is a tropical fruit originating from domestic orchards at the foot of the Andes in the Amazon Basin of Bolivia. Similar in size and shape to an egg, each bright orange fruit weighs around 45 grams. It has a firm skin which opens with a simple pierce and pop technique to reveal its white pulp.

Refreshing to eat at an ambient temperature, or when served cold or even frozen, the fruit is described as sweet yet tangy. The achacha is a cousin of the mangosteen and has the same exotic appeal as other tropical fruits such as longans, rambutans and lychees.

The fruit ripens on the tree before harvest and when kept in a closed container or bag at room temperature can be stored for weeks.

The achacha tree sprouts small white flowers each year from August to October with the fruit coming into season from December to March.

Bruce and Helen set up the Achacha Fruit Plantations company in 2002. The couple were living in Sydney at the time, with a local farmer, Ross Oliveri, managing the property.

"Ross did a great job setting out the property, but after nine years he decided he wanted to go back to growing herbs and vegetables," Bruce said.

"That was when Helen and I decided to move up to north Queensland to run the plantation ourselves.



"We weren't farmers so we've had to learn what to do, and I'm sure we've made lots of mistakes, but we're learning and enjoying it."

During their season Helen returns to Sydney where she spends her time marketing the product. Her hard work was recognised in 2012 when she was named as one of the top five finalists in the PMA Australia-New Zealand Marketer of the Year Awards.

Each year the fruit continues to grow in popularity both on the domestic market and internationally. This season the fruit will be delivered to the Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne wholesale markets as well as major stores in the UK, France and Asia.

"We established a lot of our overseas contacts through the Fruit Logistica fresh produce trade fair held in Berlin," Bruce said.

"The first year we attended was in 2011. In 2012 we were nominated as a finalist in the Fruit Logistica Berlin Innovation Awards where we were awarded third place as voted by the trade show visitors."

Through the Fruit Logistica trade show, Bruce and Helen were able to make a business contact with high-end British food retailer Marks and Spencer. This season for the second year they will be supplying Marks and Spencer with fortnightly 1.5 tonne shipments.

The Hills made the move several years ago to chemical-free farming techniques and today they use bio-dynamic farming practices on the plantation.

"You'll see the grass is pretty heavy between the rows of trees," Bruce said.

"Our policy was to keep cutting the grass like a bowling green.

"Then we started thinking about it and realised that by cutting all the grass you aren't giving any of the good bugs anywhere to inhabit.

"For safety reasons we cut the grass between the rows before the pickers come through, but we try to keep a mohawk down the middle so there's somewhere for the bugs to go."

Separating the rows of achacha trees are 3000 African mahoganies that were originally planted to act as wind breaks to protect the young achacha trees.

"They're not so important now that the trees are established, but the African mahoganies have changed the whole micro-climate," Bruce said.

"The trees are planted every 150 metres because 10 times the height of the tree



is how far the wind is deflected. So if you have a tree that is 20 metres high you should have 200 metres of protection."

When the first flowers appeared five years ago a fair amount of bee activity was noticed in the trees. With this discovery north Queensland apiarist, Steve Jurgens, was contracted to produce an excellent value-added product, raw, unheated, untreated achacha honey.

"This year we had 40 triple hives in the plantation," Bruce said.

"We buy the honey back from Steve which we then market as achacha honey.

"We don't produce enough quantity to sell to the supermarkets so our main customers are local suppliers and some boutique stockists in Sydney and Melbourne."

The achacha fruit and the achacha honey separately were selected as finalists in the 2014 ABC Delicious Produce Awards.

The achacha has long been recognised in Bolivia for its health benefits. The results of a new study from the School of Science and Health at the University of Western Sydney will go a long way to help boost the achacha fruit's reputation in Australia.

Researchers report that the low sugar content means it is an excellent choice for diabetics.

They also found that its skin, when soaked in water to make a drink, releases high levels of hydroxycitric acid (HCA) and high levels of arginine (an amino acid), the key factor in the production of nitric oxide in humans, the importance of which is being increasingly recognised in the medical field.

In moderate to high concentration, arginine can help improve blood flow and other aspects of cardiovascular health and act as a relaxant, soothing the muscles around the blood vessels, hence lowering blood pressure.

Arginine may also prevent excess accumulation of fat in the fat cells.

Bruce said the whole process of developing the crop to date has been demanding but at the same time it has been a stimulating and rewarding exercise.

"We are very grateful for the assistance and advice given to us by the local community, organic and biodynamic practitioners, North Queensland Dry Tropics, specialist officials and not least by Growcom. Without such support it would have been very difficult to launch a new product in the market place," Bruce said.