

Benefits from the Levy System

SPOTLIGHT > CHESTNUTS

Steep learning curve leads to successful farm gate venture

By Megan Hughes – grower and owner of Wandiful Produce of Wandiligong Victoria



(Above) Megan Hughes of Wandiful Produce

Farming on a small but well established family chestnut and hazelnut farm for the past year and a half has been a steep learning experience, but one that has been greatly assisted by Chestnuts Australia's Communications Officer, Tanya Edwards.

After taking over the property from my Uncle and also managing the hazelnut crop from the trees my grandfather planted in 1960, I realized quickly that I wanted to do things differently to the neighbouring bigger chestnut growers. A trip to the Ardeche region in France for their harvest season last year, was planned using online blogs from Tanya who gave useful insights into the industries 'must go' places and chestnut festivals.

Instead of selling to an agent at Melbourne Market I decided to sell direct at the farm gate and draw from the experience in France with their chestnut products. This past season, customers enjoyed the opportunity to 'pick-their-own' freshly fallen chestnuts and value-adding

was done by making 'ready-to-use' chestnut and hazelnut farm to table products.

Cooking demonstrations were a way of educating, as well as farm walks, as well as giving away recipes, mostly Chestnut Australia's little glossy fold out brochures which were really popular. Chestnuts Australia recipes have been incremental as a platform for selling chestnuts to tourists and local people as so many Australians admit they don't know how to use them.

I was so pleased to have the support from Chestnuts Australia when I began the business. Tanya attended the launch event for Wandiful Produce in Wandiligong and posted on Instagram that we had chestnut dough pizza on offer! Following the launch we rolled out our events as part of the Bright Autumn Festival programme including a Chestnut High Tea which was held in conjunction with the Wandiligong Nut Festival and promoted via the chestnut industry newsletter the Nuts and Burrs as well as through other media.



The food was prepared by Sam Martin from *the loaded basket* and myself and included chestnut hummus on crostini, chestnut bacon loaf bites, goat cheese chestnut rocket tart, chestnut bliss balls and many other creations - all delicious according to customers. They couldn't believe what a variety of savouries and sweets were made with chestnuts as the primary ingredient and it was a huge introduction to chestnuts for those who had not eaten them before.

Our cooking demonstrations included 'Chestnuts 3 ways' which showed three easy ways to take a whole chestnut, peel it and cook something delicious with it. These demonstrations were very popular and changed the perspective of a few who attended from 'I don't know what to do with a chestnut' to 'I can't stop talking to everyone I meet about chestnuts'!

I really value the support from Chestnuts Australia; particularly the Conference information (Conference was held on the 21st February, 2015) sharing that provided an overview and some discussion time for key industry issues and development opportunities; their partnerships with research bodies and passing that information on to growers, as well as the ongoing media support and of course the very practical and popular recipe brochures. I look forward to attending more of the face to face meetings and paddock walks in the future, to meet growers and learn more about chestnut production.

Photographs courtesy of Chestnuts Australia.

To view more grower stories highlighting the success of Horticulture Levy investments to date visit the Voice of Horticulture website > <http://voiceofhorticulture.org.au/>