



### Business Snapshot – Summer Snow Juice

- Summer Snow Juice was established in 1998.
- Summer Snow Juice is based on the Russo family orchard at Officer, Victoria with a second site for cool rooms and a packing line for the orchard’s apples in Upper Pakenham a short drive away.
- Summer Snow Juice is the Russo family juice processing and wholesaling business. Juices are supplied in 2 litre bottles. Summer Snow Juice markets 11 varieties of juice through, on-farm sales, an on-line store and through wholesalers to fruit and vegetable retailers and independent supermarkets. The Russo family also processes apple juice on a contract basis for customers, in particular, juice for apple cider which continues to be a growing part of their business.
- Summer Snow Juice started out in 1998 in a small way with a capacity of 2 to 3 thousand litres per day. Over time, machinery and staff have been added and capacity has increased to where they are currently processing 25 thousand litres per day. New machinery has just been ordered to increase this capacity to almost 100 thousand litres per day.
- Summer Snow Juice is made from 100% Australian fruit to produce fresh, single-strength juice with no additives.
- Turnover for the past twelve months was \$3.5 million.



When the Russo Family orchard was devastated by hail in the summer of 1998 the family faced the prospect of pulling out their trees and walking away from the orchard that had been in their family for nearly 50 years and three generations. Instead they took a completely different approach and through hard work, innovation and the support of friends, customers and neighbours, Summer Snow Juice was established and has grown and turned the family's fortunes around.

**Photos:** Top: (L to R) Robert Russo, Joe Russo  
Bottom: Bernadette Russo

## What has been their strategy to maximise success and minimise risk?

### Launching a New Business off an Existing One

At its heart the story of Summer Snow Juice is one of responding creatively to adversity. With 80% of Joe and Robert Russo's Bellevue Orchard's apple crop devastated by a hail storm just days away from harvest and no prospects of a loan to carry them over, some hard decisions had to be made. As Bernadette Russo told me:

*"we got wiped out and we honestly didn't know what to do and we had a friend, Bill Joyce in South Australia, that lent dad a machine. It was actually dad and Robert's idea to try to make juice, a machine was offered to them, and they said, oh we can try, and it all stemmed from there."*

So with a borrowed press and an idea to be different from other apple juice processors by producing variety specific fresh apple juice, lots of hard work, learning by trial and error, and the support of their long term agent, they started out with three lines of juice.

### Connection to the Local Community

The Russo family has continued with their Bellevue Orchard, though for the past 15 years a lot of effort has gone into developing the apple juice processing operation. Bernadette talked about this connection to the local community and about the mutual support the growers give each other.

*"Dad and Robert have been a large part of the growing community for a long time so they're quite well known*

*in the area and I think being hit with hail has helped; you know, people try to help each other out. In our area the orchardists; the growers, all get along really well and try to help each other out,... everybody just pats each other on the back and it's a good group to be involved with."*

*"...you've got to wear both hats at the same time ... even though our orchard is a smaller part of the business now, we are still dealing with growers all the time and we like to be known as growers. They're our suppliers and we've really got to look after them and you can see the issues that SPC have had with their growers lately, so we don't want to be known that way. We are one of them."*

### Growing Within Your Resources

When it was starting out Summer Snow Juice didn't have access to the funds to grow as fast as it could have otherwise. Acquiring the apple juice processing equipment initially meant that Robert was modifying and rebuilding second hand equipment for its new role. Part of growing within their resources has meant learning by trial and error and by asking for advice from subject matter experts in quality assurance and pasteurisation, for example, when it was needed. The business has grown along with its capabilities. Those early customers stayed with the Russo's and as word spread, their customer list grew. They also took the opportunity to supply the growing cider market and to expand their own Summer Snow Juice brand. As the bottom line improved, investments were made in plant

to increase capacity and to purchase an additional storage and packing facility.

## Recognising and Taking Opportunities When They Appear

Listening to Bernadette talk about the emergence of Summer Snow Juice it was apparent that many of the elements that would normally have been seen as presenting an opportunity were not present in their case. Mother Nature had unexpectedly intervened within a few hours to put their orchard's survival and their family business on the line. Against very limited financial resources and no experience with making apple juice, Robert and Joe had an idea to do something different to most other apple juice producers. They had a supply of fruit suitable for juicing, the facilities of their orchard, the support of neighbours and a friend with some equipment that they could use.

Did this add up to an entrepreneurial opportunity? Hindsight would tell us yes, but for me it was the family's determination to succeed against the odds that was the key. Aligned with this drive was the use of their personal and physical resources to the best effect. In Bernadette's words.

*"I think the scariest part was not knowing how far behind do you let yourself get before you do call it quits. And I think just having the Italian background dad and Robert, my uncle, just kept going and kept pushing through."*

*"We had the networks with the growers so we always had supply of fruit. It was more networking than anything else that got us through. We didn't have any help from the bank. ... and there was nobody else around where we are doing what we were doing or trying to do [it]... we just didn't have the knowledge, we just had to feel our way and keep pushing through."*

## Teamwork

Bernadette rates her family as having a good mix of complementary skills. Joe's background in fruit marketing, Robert's mechanical skills, Bernadette's organisational skills in her operations role and her cousin Nick's computing skills have all been called on time and time again to make the business more efficient and to help it expand as demand increased.

Summer Snow Juice operates with a young team of enthusiastic people who care about what they do.

Bernadette rates them as a great team.

*"And people who just care about what they're doing and I think it helps... it helps when your workers see you out on the floor shovelling rotten apples with them, they don't see you just sitting in the office and telling them what they have to do. You get out there and help them do it. And I think you get a lot of respect out of them doing that."*

## People That Help and Influence the Entrepreneur

When I asked Bernadette about the people who have helped and influenced her she nominated her dad, Joe, and her uncle, Robert, first. Then Bill Joyce, an old friend of her dad who helped out by giving them their first press. Networking is important to Bernadette and she has a few growers that she "bounces ideas off" as well.

Bernadette also talked about the Russo family's long term business relationship with their customers, many of whom had been with them from the beginning. She also talked about the importance of the relationship with their Melbourne agent, the Melbourne Pear Company.

*"...they've had our juice from day dot and they say to us they don't want anybody else selling it. They just want to sell it, so people like that have been very important to our business program."*

## Final Word

When Bernadette was talking about marketing their 'Summer Snow' juice she told me something that is applicable to all rural entrepreneurs.

*"I think as farmers we were quite reserved and we don't pat ourselves on the back very often, but to push a brand forward you've really got to be proud of what you've done, and show people, and have the guts to walk up to somebody in the shopping centre and say "have you tried this, it's really good."*

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