

Walkamin's world firsts



The Watkins family is leading the way in employing innovation to offset the impact of banana imports in the Australian market. Paul Oliveri reports

With the decision to allow bananas from The Philippines into Australia, the bureaucratic steamroller we call government has informed the local banana growers they have to be more innovative.

The Watkins family, who live at Walkamin on the Atherton Tablelands, is already leading the way.

In the past 12 months they have already established a manufacturing plant to produce paper and other products from banana trunks (in conjunction with Papyrus Australia) and invented a new form of packaging for bananas called the 'Banana Blankey' (patent pending).

Trading as Mount Uncle Grazing Company, directors Bruce and Kem, along with sons Mark and Rob, have 200 acres of lady finger-variety bananas, some 7,000 avocado trees and 8,500 macadamia trees to keep them busy.

Also forming part of the value-adding business on this spectacularly beautiful property is a distillery and teahouse (see page 45).

It might sound an odd combination.

"At Mount Uncle if we're not happy with something we go out and do it ourselves. We keep a small type farm, go into those grey areas of business and try and stay innovative," says Rob, who looks after the farming side of the business.

Innovative in Rob's case is taking the problem of their fruit arriving at market in a condition that doesn't attract top dollar (through nothing but the tyranny of distance) and finding a solution, the 'Banana Blankey'.

"We believe Aussie farmers have to get everything possible out of their paddocks and this will be another way of doing it."

"In 10 months we have gone from idea to patent pending, which is extremely quick. This is related to two things: first I'm a very impatient person, when I want something done I want it done now; and second there is a huge need for this product," Rob says.



L-R: Rob Watkins, Tony Cichonski, Ion Heimana, and Colin Wyllie from Papyrus Australia

Traditionally, Mount Uncle used five different packing materials in its lady finger cartons. Those five materials are set to be replaced by the 'Banana Blankey', a material that is totally recyclable and capable of holding moisture.

"Through the dehydration process, each day a banana is on transport it loses 5 percent of its weight. By moistening the 'Blankey' we can halt or lessen this process and over the next few months we will be doing further scientific testing to look at the optimum moisture levels," Rob says.

Currently, large sheets of the 'Blankey' are produced in an undisclosed Australian factory before being sent to the Lotus Glenn Correctional facility at Walkamin

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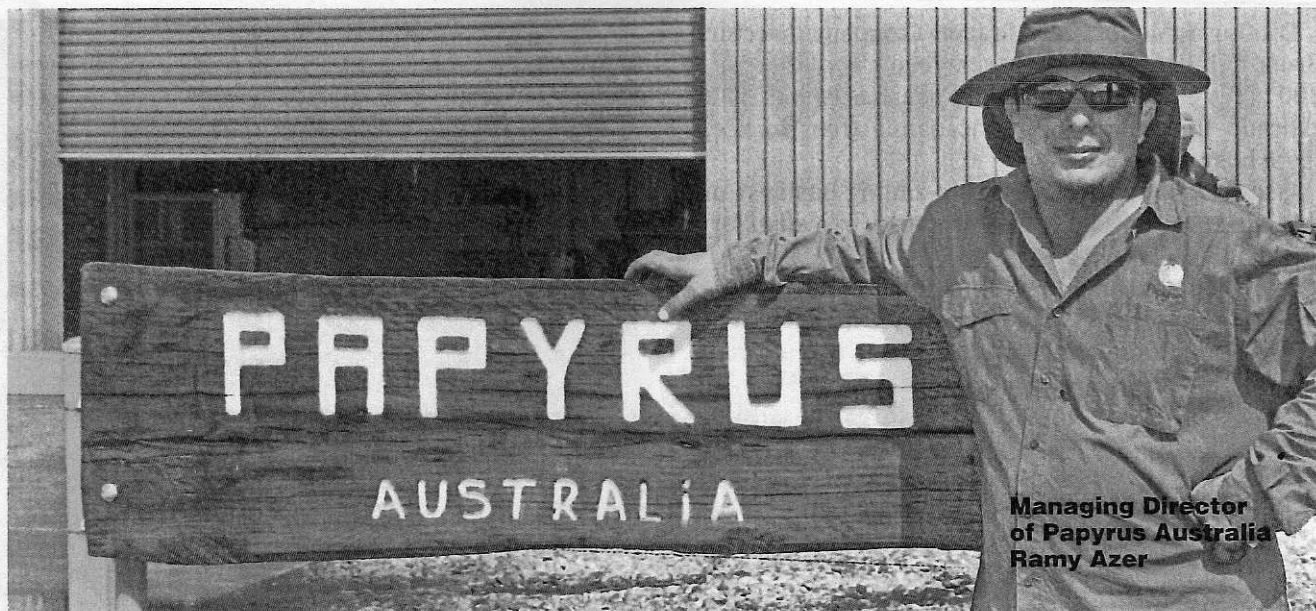
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**Managing Director
of Papyrus Australia
Ramy Azer**

for final shaping, thus the 'Blankey' is totally Australian manufactured.

"Part of our philosophy was to keep the 'Banana Blankey' for Australia, but without the support of Queensland Corrections we would be unable to produce the final product at a reasonable price," Rob says.

Even so, the price of the 'Blankey' is around double that of traditional packing material.

"It is early days so far and price will reduce when we are able to get our mass-manufacturing processes in place.

"What growers also need to remember is this product will decrease the labour time required to pack and get their fruit to market in 99 percent quality. This equates to better prices for premium-quality fruit and better sale rates at the supermarket.

"I don't know about other growers but I'm willing to spend extra dollars, not cents, to achieve this goal," he says.

Rob's efforts in developing the 'Banana Blankey' have already been well recognised with him winning 'Inventor of the Week' award on ABC TV's *New Inventors* program.

While Rob's invention is set to take off and revolutionise banana packaging the innovation at Mount Uncle doesn't stop there.

In conjunction with Adelaide-based Papyrus Australia, the family has the first commercial-grade banana processing plant that turns the trunks into high-quality banana ply paper and a range of building and packaging material.

Some prototype plants of this nature have been in operation at Papyrus Australia's Adelaide factory, but this is the first commercial on-farm plant.

"We have been in the development stages since August 2008. Together with the fantastic team from

Papyrus we have been gearing up this machinery for industrial-strength application, which hasn't been without its challenges.

"Being on-farm the guys from Papyrus have had a huge transition, it's a lot rougher than their city-based factory: we have the wet season to contend with and we get the banana trunks to processing a whole lot quicker.

"This means there is a lot more moisture in the trunks which adds to the challenges of processing," Rob says.

The amazing features of the processing plant include its ability to take a previously discarded product, the banana trunk, and using little energy and no extra water or chemicals produce high-quality paper, veneer and other fibre-based building and packaging products.

"This is really the next generation of processing, it's clean, green and recycles a product that was previously cut down and either left to rot or at best mulched," he says.

"The facility will be able to take a 1.5-metre banana log — so it's quite big.

"We plan to process the whole 200 acres of bananas through this plant, which will provide another value-adding stream for us.

"With the threat of Philippines bananas on the horizon we believe Aussie farmers have to get everything possible out of their paddocks and this will be another way of doing it.

"We are honoured to be working with the highly skilled and dedicated team from Papyrus and to have the world's first commercial plant operating here."

With the plant in operation from late April 2009 and the 'Banana Blankey' set to take off, Mount Uncle is one of those places to keep a very close eye on.



