



A FRESH APPROACH

With demand increasing for both its fruit and premium lime juice cordial, 'Rancho Relaxo' is proving to be anything but for the farm's two committed owners.

STORY Melissa Ellis PHOTOS Bob Weeks

With their plump and voluptuous shape, glossy green hue and fresh citrus smell, limes are a prized fruit in many countries and cuisines. Their thirst-quenching properties and fresh flavour are a perfect addition to many drinks and foods, from sparkling mineral water and daiquiris to Thai dishes!

The stellar demand for this attractive fruit regularly sees them attain prices per kilo that could make some other growers turn the very shade of a lime, particularly when supply wanes in the cooler off-season but demand remains strong.

"Addictive" is the way one north coast lime producer best describes her fruity crop, grown in an established orchard deep in the lush, Byron Bay hinterland.

Having embarked on her new career as a farmer about seven years ago, Jane Boniface and partner Jose Falagan now have a flourishing business.

Aside from selling a portion of their premium crop to Woolworths as part of a north coast growers' group, and fruit direct to the public at both Byron and Ocean Shores Farmers' Markets year-round, 'Rancho Relaxo' has an award-winning lime juice cordial, with demand far out-stripping supply. The tantalising cordial won a silver Sydney Fine Food Medal in 2006 and a bronze in 2008.

In short, the couple can't juice the limes and make the concentrated cordial fast enough!

While Jane admits that's a privileged position to be in, there's no doubt she and Jose more than earned their 'farmer' stripes, after buying the property largely to house Jose's ex-circus

vehicles and to provide a home for Jane's horse, Pokey.

The lime trees, along with mandarins and custard apples, were a secondary bonus of the fertile acreage, which boasts a graduating north-east slope and ample water supply.

After following the previous farm owner around the property with a tape recorder, Jose and Jane created a typed manual of

free, we buy the little beneficial bugs in, the parasitic wasps and also the red lady beetles."

Naturally lowering the numbers of pests such as red scale and mites, Jane said the wasps and beetles are placed directly onto the trees, where they live and breed. Depending on weather conditions, such as extreme heat or rainfall, she may need to re-introduce the bugs another couple of times throughout Spring and Summer.

A White Oil product such as Bio-Pest is also sprayed onto the trees monthly and a copper sulphate mix is used sporadically to treat for fungus.

Thanks to the farm's north east aspect, Rancho Relaxo often enjoys an early start to the peak lime season (about mid-way through January) with the bounty continuing through to the end of April and even May. The farm continues to harvest fruit in smaller quantities year-round.

"It's always a bit of an unknown every year with the limes, whether you're going to get a bumper off-season crop or just a medium to average (yield)," Jane explained. "It

has a lot to do with the pruning and what time the rain comes, if the conditions are right they'll go back into flower and then you'll get a good off-season crop..."

A canvas bag with a velcro strip is worn during picking, with the velcro peeled back to transfer a full load of eight to 10 kilos into a container called a 'lug'. Ripe fruit is selectively hand-picked from each tree – with size, shape and colour the primary factors.

Fruit that starts to yellow (ripen) early on the tree is set aside for juicing, as it's the rich



instructions to follow, and also evolved their own techniques and practises from experience. The existing growers' group also assisted their early education.

As she now happily discusses the cyclical nature of the farm, while navigating the terrain in the four wheel drive, you would never guess Jane's delayed initiation to farm life.

"Because the limes trickle through all year they're a really different crop to any other citrus," she explained. "In Spring after you've done your pruning, because we're pesticide-



ABOVE L-R: Jane Boniface and Jose Falagan owners of Rancho Relaxo, grading the limes in the packing shed.

green skin that's most prized for whole-fruit sales, however Jane said the yellow or 'Winter' lime doesn't have an inferior flavour. To ensure maximum juice levels are attained for all fruit, Jane informally sizes them while still on the tree, ensuring she can't touch her thumb to her pointer finger around the fruit circumference before harvest.

Once that day's limes are picked, they're taken to the packing shed where they run through a brushing machine to remove any field dust and lightly polish the skins. They're then graded by size and also skin quality, with the plump, round blemish-free limes highly-prized as a premium product.

Jane asserts that a few superficial marks won't affect the quality of the juice within the fruit, a fact that consumers are beginning to appreciate. And she said it's common for market goers to inspect and even smell the limes prior to purchase, such is the allure of that tangy citrus aroma.

"They're a little bit addictive, they're a real pleasure to work with, I love the smell of them...(and) they're a nice, easy-sized fruit to

handle," Jane said.

While the farm's fruit commitments also include distributing smaller limes to bottle shops, it's the non-alcoholic cordial that's

"...I started making a cordial of sorts probably within six months of having the farm, just for us and friends that were visiting," Jane said. "It just got better and better and I got more confident at handling the fruit...and then a friend of mine in Brisbane kept saying to me: 'You should really put this in a bottle, this is fabulous you know...'"

provided Jane and Jose with a burgeoning business opportunity.

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That was back in 2004, but the farm continued to consume so much of the couple's time that Jane didn't embark on the lime cordial venture until two years later.

Finally, she contacted a food scientist who asked her to send down two samples, including the preferred beverage Jane had been tweaking over a couple of years.

With the acid to sugar content nominated as 'perfect' Jane proceeded with research on bottle and brand options, and perfected the step-by-step method provided by the food scientist.

These days, about 60 to 75 per cent of the farm's yield goes into making the Rancho Relaxo lime cordial, enabling Jane to create a year-round supply for several Northern Rivers' outlets. With each bottle containing the juice of about 14 limes, the cordial is either made at the time of juicing or mostly within 24 hours of the juicing process.



ABOVE L-R: Jane and Jose harvest the fruit year round, Jane working in the bottling room.

"I make up a sugar syrup and then I add the freshly-squeezed limes to that and that's it – there's no preservatives added, it's very, very simple," Jane explained.

Jane and Jose have a bottling room adjacent to their house, and recently purchased an orange juicing machine made in Valencia, to assist during the peak lime season, when it's impossible for them to juice completely by hand.

Interestingly, Jane said hand-juicing provides a higher volume of liquid, but the faster machine is used to prevent excess limes from spoiling.

In summer, Jane and Jose spend about two to three days each week making the cordial, with the rest of the time spent on lime picking, grading and sorting, weeding and grass cutting.

Tree pruning is staggered, beginning at the end of May and continuing throughout the cooler months.

Jane said a grafted lime tree occasionally yields fruit at three years of age, with a reasonable crop expected in its fourth year of growth. Years five through to 12 are considered optimum, with 'dead wood' the biggest issue with really old trees as their fruit can be compromised.

Like the farm's title suggests, Jane and Jose take a relaxed and low-interventionist approach to farming, assisting nature rather than pushing hard for continual bumper crops.

"We don't do much," Jane admitted. "We don't really irrigate, we pretty much rely on the natural rainfall and we don't heavily fertilise, we just use a little bit of Rustica Plus twice a year, (there are) no pesticides and we don't wax (the fruit). We use very little of anything here and I think the rich volcanic soil does the trick

for us."

While their farming approach may be synonymous with the name, Jane and Jose's workload certainly isn't, as owners of a so-called 'fruit-salad' farm. Just as the limes start to decline in volume, their mandarin and custard apples peak, diverting their attention to these other crops.

(The property's unusual moniker was suggested by Jose's two sons, who initially thought farm life would be more laidback!)

Farm life is set to grow even busier in the years ahead, with an increase in cordial production planned. Jane and Jose have been planting a couple of hundred additional lime trees each year over the past few years to help them service that growing demand.

With 100 per cent of cordial supplies currently bought within the Northern Rivers, Jane is this year hoping to send it out of town to loyal customers who live around Australia.

"A lot of them buy it at the Byron Farmers' Market and then ring me when they get home to Adelaide or Canberra or wherever they are and say: 'Can you please send me a 'fix'!" Jane said.

Rancho Relaxo limes can be purchased at Byron Farmers' Markets each Thursday and Ocean Shores Farmers' Markets on Tuesday. The Cellars bottle shops at Byron and Bangalow also have whole fruit. North coast stockists for Rancho Relaxo lime juice cordial include Providore at Lennox Head, The Green Garage at Byron Bay, Spar and Menin's Supermarkets at Lismore and the above Farmers' markets.