

GOURMET AND GREEN

The branding of King Island

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Abstract

In less than thirty years, King Island – in Australia’s Bass Strait - has become popularly synonymous with quality foods and unspoilt beauty. The marketing success of King Island Dairy, in particular, has helped orient much of the island’s activities towards particular services and goods. They benefit from a general perception that, for reasons both coincidental and contrived, King Island is singularly blessed for premium produce. This article traces the rise this image, and considers its irony in light of the various vulnerabilities that have otherwise hindered King Island’s development. From the hazardous winds of the ‘Roaring 40s’, to the sporadic investment in its infrastructure, King Island’s history is dotted with obstacles and setbacks. In turn, it is argued that, insofar as the King Island brand now relies on certain associations for effectively marketing both its export commodities and its tourist attractions, islanders must address if not resolve a range of issues and/or inadequacies that undermine the brand’s integrity.

Keywords

King Island, food, branding, tourism

Introduction

In March 2007, luxury liner *Orion* set sail on its first ‘Gourmet Voyage of Tasmania’. The first of two such trips *Orion* had planned for the year, it centred on the west coast of Tasmania; the second, scheduled for December, concentrates on the east coast. The concept is simple enough: seven-days aboard Australia’s only five-star expedition ship, seeing and sampling the produce that has made Tasmania a favourite amongst gourmands. In keeping with the prestige experience, celebrity Serge Dansereau, most famous for turning Balmoral Bathers’ Pavilion restaurant into a Sydney landmark, is the onboard chef. The French-Canadian is also widely credited with stirring Australians’ interest in fresh, local ingredients – a passion that lends itself well to the voyage’s regional focus. It seems a passion matched by *Orion*’s guests: with fares starting at \$(Au)4,800 per person, the March voyage was a sell-out. Such enthusiasm suggests that the ‘optional extras’ might prove equally attractive, like the extra \$(Au)200 for several scenic flights, an extra \$(Au)245 to dive off Flinders Island, and, perhaps best befitting the general theme, an extra \$(Au)150 for a ‘food lover’s lunch’ on King Island.

The *Orion* voyage is one of several such cruises set to capitalise on the burgeoning market for ‘culinary tourism’, a term which was first used by folklorist Lucy Long in 1998 and can be defined broadly as “intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other – participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style not one’s own” (Long, 2003: 21). This year, in particular, sees an extraordinary surge in this kind of experience, albeit one that aligns the concept with a more conventional, commercial understanding of tourism: Crystal Cruises’ Festival of Food and Wine offers a fourteen-day ‘Pyramids to Pompeii’ trip, which starts in Dubai and ends in Sorrento; Abercrombie & Kent operate

cruise journeys through the canal districts of southern France; while the Regent Seven Seas cruise offers a twelve-day excursion from Hong Kong to Bangkok (Meryment, 2007: 8). The *Orion* route effectively places Tasmania's culinary highlights alongside some of the world's most feted, and extends Tasmania's image as a food-lover's paradise¹. At the same time, the voyage underscores the extent to which particular areas are dependent on this reputation, within Australia generally and Tasmania specifically. For *Orion* guests, the trip includes a visit to the world-renown King Island Dairy factory and tasting room to – as *Orion* advertises – “get you in the mood for your gourmet experience”².

This article looks at how King Island ended up on the *Orion* itinerary. It is argued that, insofar as culinary tourism involves “intentional, exploratory participation”, in Long's sense of the term, then: first, there are specific means by which key players on King Island encouraged this kind of intentional exploration; and second, there are specific reasons why certain products were deemed particularly suited for the experience. To put it another way: a ‘food-lover's lunch’ on King Island cues a range of meanings, not only for King Island but for the *Orion* guests. As Bell and Valentine explain: “in a world in which self-identity and place-identity are woven through webs of consumption, what we eat (and where, and why) signals, as the aphorism says, who we are” (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 3). This article considers this reciprocity, and shows that the cachet of the King Island brand is neither accidental nor secure; it rests on a careful combination of market opportunities, consumer perceptions and risk management.

History

Located 80 kilometres off the north-western tip of Tasmania, King Island is 64 kilometres long by 27 kilometres wide and has a population that currently hovers around 1800. Its geographical position, in the centre of the Bass Strait at 39°52 South, 143°59 East, locates it squarely in the wind belt known as the ‘Roaring 40s’, a zone constantly affected by strong winds produced over the 25,000 kilometres of unbroken ocean that extend to South America. The westerly winds funnel through the strait between Victoria, to the north, and Tasmania, to the south, directly onto the Island's west coast. There are two main consequences of this for the island's human inhabitants. The first is that the maritime location and year-round rainfall have combined with its rich soil to make it one of the most fertile agricultural environments in Australia. The second, less comfortable, aspect is that the west coast (in particular) suffers from regular (and often extreme) storms.

To appreciate how and why the popular contemporary perception of King Island developed the way it did, a brief discussion of the island's history is required. This is because, in various ways, the contemporary marketing of King Island draws on specific historical events and images. King Island was first sighted by Captain William Campbell of the *Deptford* in 1797, but it was not named until January 1801, by Captain John Black of the *Harbinger*. That month, the *Margaret* sailed through Bass Strait, under the command of John Buyers, who was keen to find out more of the area's little known islands. The Crown's interest was undoubtedly encouraged by French activities at the time. In November 1802, French commodore Nicholas Baudin sailed from Port Jackson with three ships and arrived at King Island in December. By that time, more was known of what King Island had to offer. In March 1801, Governor King had sent Lieutenant Grant of the *Lady Nelson* to investigate the lands reported by the *Harbinger* and the *Margaret*. Although Grant's expedition was curtailed by bad weather, he noticed the island's abundance of a large type of seal known as ‘sea elephants’ (*Macrorhinus proboscideus*). Responding to this intelligence, in September 1801 the *Harrington* sailed for King Island with a sealing gang and returned in December with 3000 hair and fur seal skins and 2500 gallons of seal oil (Cumpston, 1973: 41-43). Baudin's expedition was elaborate enough to cause Governor King some anxiety. Fearful that France might formalise Baudin's discoveries, King moved quickly: under the command of Lieutenant Charles Robbins, an expeditionary force was sent in the *Cumberland*. Lest Baudin's team failed to heed King's message (that the island fell within the British Empire's proclamation of 1788), Robbins took possession of King Island in the name of King George. Somewhat bemused by Robbins' brazenness, Baudin gave the young officer a letter for Governor King to allay any concerns (Phillips, 1977: 90).



Figure 1 – Location of King Island³



Figure 2: Map of King Island

Of particular interest to both the French and English visitors was the number of sea elephants along the island's shores, enough to have lured a cohort of English sealers to King Island by the time Baudin's expedition arrived. The mammal's placid, gentle nature, coupled with a slow and laboured gait, made it highly vulnerable to the sealers' iron-tipped lances⁴. For this reason, the French zoologist Francois Péron presciently lamented in late 1802: "This large species will be wiped out like so many other" (quoted in Cumpston, 1973: 59).

As much as Governor King was keen to assert the Crown's claim in the face of the French, in the early 1800s the island's status was still far from certain. So, while the government debated the merits of an official settlement, it became a base for a somewhat daring and largely anonymous assortment of sealers, hunters and whalers, as well as the odd visit from runaways and deserters, all of whom relied on the unregulated and highly lucrative trade in sea elephant oil. This included a series of American sealing gangs from 1803 and their anarchic and violent tussles over the various seal colonies earned them the title of "the wild men of the Straits" (Jones and Sullivan, 1989: 28). The seal hunt continued for several decades, something that, not surprisingly, eventually proved Péron right, as the Island's laissez-faire commerce helped take the sea elephant close to extinction by the end of the 19th Century.

Thanks to Péron's records, much is known of King Island's flora, vegetation, game and marine life at the start of the 1800s. There is a distinct lack, however, of contemporary accounts of the island's indigenous inhabitants. Indeed, Péron wrote:

Over the whole extent of King Island we saw no trace of humans, and everything indicates that this island is equally unknown both to the wild tribes of Van Diemen's Land and New Holland (quoted in Micco, 1971: 11).

That is not to say that the area was entirely devoid of human habitation before Campbell's sighting in 1797. In 1989 an Aboriginal skeleton was found in a King Island cave. It was dated 14270 ± 640 BP, a time when King Island was linked to both Tasmania and mainland Australia. Moreover, as Josephine Flood notes, its proportions point to early adaptation to the Roaring 40s — the short, stocky frame would have readily conserved the body heat needed for surviving the windy weather (1995: 68). Besides this archaeological find, though, proof of Aboriginal occupation of King Island once Bass Strait had come into existence is scant. There is evidence that, prior to the arrival of the British, Tasmania's Aborigines visited offshore islands like Hunter and Three Hummock, but none that they went as far as King Island. One possible explanation, from Hooper, is the inadequacy of the materials from which these Aborigines fashioned 'canoes', that is, bundles of stringy-bark, leptospermum or melaleuca bark tied together (1973: 23). In the early 1800s, though, as King Island attracted sealers, whalers, deserters and ex-convicts, the Aboriginal presence became a lot more conspicuous, in the form of Aboriginal women taken from Tasmania to King Island, for both concubinage and their sealing skills (Hooper, 1973: 36)⁵.

A Marine Graveyard

Besides its abundance of sea elephants, King Island also became notorious for the number of shipwrecks its waters caused. Between the start of the 1800s and the early 1930s, a wreck occurred every second year. Whether they were sealing, fishing, carrying immigrants or convicts, or simply exploring, with settlement at Port Phillip, and the discoveries of gold in the 1850s, thousands of vessels sailed annually around the Victorian coast, to the north of the Island (Loney, 1971: ii). The north coast was the location for most wrecks since numerous reefs south of King Island rendered the southern route even more dangerous. With no lights on King Island until 1861, voyages often ended in tragedy. Notwithstanding the Roaring 40s, and even with the building of lights at Otway and Wickham, ships still had to contend with reefs, shoals and currents on the eastern side, primitive navigational aids, and poor visibility (Loney, 1971: ii). A general indifference on the part of the colonial authorities was also to blame⁶. Wrecks in these waters claimed 805 lives between 1835 and 1881. Indeed, the worst of these, the *Cataraqui* wreck of 1845 and the subsequent loss of 400 lives, remains Australia's worst ever civil shipping disaster⁷.

Without any decisive or robust intervention from the Crown, there was little in the way of permanent activity or habitation on King Island in this period. As Hooper points out, the combination of rough seas, wild winds and a rocky foreshore proved a formidable brake on its development (1973: 64). It was not until 1859 that a telegraph line was laid across the Island, and 1861 that a lighthouse was built at Cape Wickham — at 48 metres, still Australia's tallest (Phillips, 1977: 89). Leases were granted to various individuals between the 1830s and the 1870s, and a few of these lease-holders made the first attempts at commercial agriculture and dairying on King Island. In 1888 the Island was officially opened up for settlement and selection, and after a decade the population reached 155. From the turn of the century, the township of Currie was slowly built up. In turn, the signs of 'progress' and 'civilization' that transformed Australia's urban centres in the 19th Century (commerce, transport and communication) took shape on King Island (Hooper, 1973: 83).

The Discovery of Scheelite

From the 1860s, gold seekers from Victoria had tested King Island for a similar find, with no luck. Still, a discovery of a different kind made King Island a mining interest nonetheless. In 1904, while panning for alluvial tin along the beach at Grassy, Tasmanian prospector Tom Farrell found a scheelite-bearing quartz vein. Farrell effectively found the first thing since the sealing days that would make the Island a significant economic concern. A crystal-like mineral, scheelite has a very specific and valuable use: it is a calcium tungstate, an ore of tungsten, and has the highest melting point of all the elements, thus making it useful for hardening steel and producing tungsten carbides (Jones and Sullivan, 1989: 60). In 1910 the scheelite-bearing land was bought by Reg Cummins, a miner from Bendigo, who farmed part of it and sold the rest to the Broken Hill Company in 1913. Over the next seven decades, scheelite mining became King Island's most lauded contribution to the nation's wealth⁸.

The importance of scheelite mining on King Island fluctuated alongside its relative value to national production. Tungsten carbides eventually proved important for the manufacturing of high speed tools, engines and turbine parts, space craft and filaments. Generally, then, demand rose during war, and waned with peace. In the lead-up to the Second World War, for instance, the mine treated 500 tonnes of ore each week (Jones and Sullivan, 1989: 63). By the mid 1970s almost all of it was exported, and competed against exports from China and USA. By then, some 400 people out of a population of 3000 worked in King Island's scheelite mine, and, by the late 1980s, were helping to produce some 1000 metric tonnes of scheelite every year. In November 1990, however, cheaper supplies from China had depressed world prices for tungsten so much that King Island's scheelite mine closed (Maby, 1991: 10).

Island Agriculture

In the decades after it was opened up for selection, and alongside the boom in scheelite mining, King Island lured a trickle of pastoralists, mostly from Victorian farms. In 1901 the Island population was estimated at 242; the following year, the first dairy cooperative on the Island was formed and Mrs Mary Bowling turned the first sod for the King Island Dairy. In 1910 and 1911, there was a boom in land selection (over 200,000 acres were taken up), bought mostly by Melbourne-based speculators, and farmed by 'genuine' settlers. Their arrival had a major impact: in 1910 the inaugural agriculture show was held, the first stock sale took place and, by 1911 the population had risen to 778 (Hooper, 1973: 86). However, as the outbreak of the First World War saw some 20% of King Island's adult male population enlist for service, there was little agricultural development for its duration.

After the War, the Australian government faced a major challenge in the repatriation of the country's service personnel. Employers were largely indifferent to the returnees, and generally ignored any obligation to rehire those that had served abroad. To forestall serious unemployment, and inspired by the mythic potential of motherland rhetoric, the Hughes Government introduced the Soldier-

Settler Scheme. The idea was to sell the ex-service-people small blocks of rural land on low interest rates in the hope that they would become productive, prosperous farms. The government's policy mantra was 'Men, Money and Markets' and this meant populating rural areas, providing start-up settlement funds, and finding markets for the produce it assumed would be bountifully forthcoming (Molony, 1987: 244).

As with the rest of the country, Canberra's plan to allocate land lots to returned soldiers on King Island was largely a failure. In 1919 the scheme established fifty new farms, plus the consolidation of some existing ones. As in other places, there was a very high walkout rate amongst the 'soldier settlers', largely due to the inadequacy of the lots, the inexperience of the novice farmers, and a distinct lack of governmental guidance. The pattern surfaced during the Second World War too: a slump due to wartime disruptions, plus a repeat of a 'soldier settlement' scheme, as the 168 farms that were made available between 1946 and 1948 led to similarly poor results (Hooper, 1973: 87). By 1949, there were just 100 farms on the Island, 95 of which were dairy operations. The War Service Land and Closer Settlement Schemes, which began in 1950, added 153 farms over the next 12 years: 108 dairy farms and 45 sheep properties (BAE, 1977: 3).

By the early to mid 1970s, consistent with trends across Australia's primary industries, King Island's farmers, and especially its dairy farmers, faced an acute income problem with reduced market prices for their stock and steep increases in farm input prices. In turn, the number of dairy farms on the Island fell from a peak of 197 (in 1959) to just 41 by 1976. Fearful for the long-term viability of dairy farming on King Island, in March 1976 the Tasmanian Minister for Agriculture requested that the nation's Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) survey the situation and canvass possible solutions. The BAE's subsequent report concluded that, short of considerable adjustments (like debt restructuring, farm build-up, and household support), farmers' incomes would need to be supplemented — the most likely source being casual employment in either the (then still operating) scheelite mine, or in the contract harvesting of kelp (BAE, 1977: 93). The rest of this article considers how King Island's dairy industry not only sidestepped this seemingly inevitable fate, but actually became the Island's number one selling point, and the implications this had had for other areas of island life.

The Turnaround

With the sluggish returns looking like an insurmountable obstacle, the mid to late 1970s proved a pivotal period on King Island. In 1978 husband and wife Bill and Robyn Kirk bought the King Island Dairy Cooperative for \$(Au)180,000. At first, the Kirks made processed cheese for Kraft to export to the Middle East. At that stage, though, the dairy community was not only suffering financially but its milking techniques were both dated and inefficient. With assistance from the Tasmanian Development Authority (TDA), the Kirks secured a much-needed capital injection, and in 1984 they made a seminal decision to reorient the Dairy's output upmarket. To this end, Bill Kirk tried a novel but effective way to pitch the top-end butter and double cream, thumbing through a Melbourne phone book's listings to contact specialty delicatessens. Still, even as the Dairy launched its soon-to-be signature brie in April 1985, the TDA (owed about \$(Au)900,000) decided to dispossess the Kirks and in early 1986 ordered the sale of King Island Dairy to Transequity, a Melbourne-based second board company, for \$(Au)300,000. Later that year, with Transequity acquired by Agricorp, an agribusiness consultancy, the Dairy came into private hands (Darby, 1989: 11).

Under the direction of Dan Brown, Agricorp's interest in the venture was a timely one. Between 1960 and 1990, per capita cheese consumption in Australia rose from 2.8 kilograms to 8.9 kilograms and demand for camembert and brie grew by about 15% per annum between 1980 and 1990. King Island Dairy concentrated on this specialty end, and Dan Brown argued that, for cheese enthusiasts, King Island's frost-free climate produced creams and brie that could not be bettered (Austin, 1991: 100). In 1992 a group of Melbourne investors, keen to exploit this point of difference, bought the shares from Agricorp and turned it into an unlisted public company — The Island Food Company. By this time, the King Island label had assumed a distinct and prestigious cachet, something that director Mark Holcombe, who came on board in 1996, was committed to. With his background in

brand management (with former employer, food giant Goodman Fielder), Holcombe ordered more vigilant control of the King Island brand:

We set up very clear marketing. Anything produced with the King Island brand had to come from King Island. In 1998, when there was a drought, we ran short of products. But rather than get the cream made elsewhere, we just ran out... This is important in our marketing, but it is also true – the products are creamier because of the milk (quoted in Gome, 1999: 84).



Figure 3: King Island Dairy Logo⁹

By this stage, annual revenue was around \$40 million and the business was making a small profit.

Insofar as the growth can be attributed to an increasing appreciation of quality dairy products, the role of Swiss-born head cheese-maker Ueli Berger is especially significant. Berger came to Australia in 1975, aged just 19, the grandson of a cheese-maker and the son of a dairy farmer. He was one of two Swiss cheese-makers invited by the Lactos cheese company in Tasmania. In 1998 he was invited to lend his expertise to the King Island Dairy and oversee its installation of new white mould cheese-making equipment. From the start, Berger sensed the potential:

[Before arriving] I knew of the brand, but the product was very up and down, very unstable. When they approached me, I came across and very quickly could see the huge potential, just by doing things right every day. It had a very chequered history up until then, and had gone broke a few times before I arrived. Once I got here, things really started happening, we started doing things right. (interview with the author, May 2007)

Ironically, although Berger was initially invited to help see King Island Dairy modernise through more advanced machinery, the cheese-maker's preference for age-old practices has become one of the brand's key selling points, strategically folded into its imagery:

I learned cheese-making in Switzerland, and they're very conservative there, they have very traditional ways. [With cheese-making] I just believe you have to feel it, you can't just put the machine in place and forget about that feel. So, in certain ways, maybe we took a few steps back, but I think these steps were critical. I think you have to have that personal feel, because you can't hurry cheese, and a machine doesn't know that. (ibid)

Berger's philosophy works to the brand's advantage and lends it a boutique appeal that has been validated with numerous industry accolades from, for instance, the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales and the Australian Dairy Corporation. At the same time, Berger's time at the Dairy has paralleled a discernible expansion in the national market for specialty cheeses, a food category that has moved from gourmet delis in the 1980s to suburban supermarkets in the 1990s. It is a diffusion Berger has actively encouraged:



Figure 4: Ueli Berger, head cheese-maker at King Island Dairy

The market has changed a lot to our advantage because people wanted to experience new flavours. We were producing really good cheese just at the right time and the people looked for something different. We had a name already, and the product stood up to it, it proved itself. (ibid)

To this end, Berger has carefully paced the introduction of newer, bolder cheeses. In addition to its stable of soft white cheeses (brie, double brie, triple brie and camembert), washed rind cheeses, blue vein and cheddar, Berger introduced the Black Label range and the Discovery range. The Black Label range is aimed primarily at cheese connoisseurs and stocked only in delicatessens. Whilst ordinary cheeses mature over around 10 days, these showcase ones are left for up to 50 days, and thus develop the fuller, richer flavours of traditional, French-style cheeses (Bernoth, 2002: 15). The Discovery range, on the other hand, involves innovative cheese-making techniques (such as scrubbing the cheese by hand with brevi linen¹⁰) and is pitched at everyday supermarket shoppers keen to experiment – for example, with an ash-rolled blue. As Berger explains, this range was designed to bridge any gap between top-end aficionados and the average consumer: “We don’t just want to reach cheese buffs. These cheeses are accessible to everyone” (quoted in Wright, 2005: 114).

Besides changes to the Dairy’s product line, Berger also oversaw the company’s growing association with specific imagery and associations. Increasingly, the brand appealed to the popular image of King Island as clean and green: it became synonymous with purity, tradition and wholesomeness, traits that rendered all its produce both lucrative and rare. These advantages can be summarised thus: extreme fertility, moderate temperatures, year-round rainfall, and a ‘pollution-free’ environment, all of which produces quality pastures and helps herds produce superior milk. Indeed, this is the crux of King Island’s regionalism, the appeal to geographical singularities that producers use to trump the seeming sameness of the multinational conglomerates. As Barbara Santich points out, a focus on regional attributes inverts the usual dynamic of contemporary marketing:

In globalisation, consumer requirements – as interpreted by marketers – determine the characteristics of the food; in regionalisation, producers decide (with reference to the environment, traditional practices, etc) the specificities of their product. If globalisation gives supremacy to consumers – the market – then regionalisation empowers producers (Santich, 2002: 7).

This is a point echoed in Berger’s control over King Island Dairy’s product and image:

Over the last ten years, we've made sure everything we do is spot on, it is just so delicate. With whatever we do, it has to be 100%, because that's the King Island quality — people will know if something's different. So I make sure every batch of cheese is graded before it leaves here to make sure it's of the quality people know King Island to be. That's how we can keep the brand name going, we just don't compromise. (interview with the author, May 2007)

In fact, the lushness of the King Island's melilot clover pastures has even become a point of myth, one with the most tenuous basis in history. Legend and anecdote has it that straw mattresses containing dried grass and other seeds were swept ashore from French and English shipwrecks, germinated in the rich soils, and created some of the country's richest pastures. For Berger, there is something to the tale:

I reckon this climate is magic, it's not just myth; there is something special. I can take the same recipe elsewhere but it wouldn't be the same... there is something special here. (ibid)

Dubious explanations aside, King Island does still boast around 100,000 wind-swept hectares (the Roaring 40s can still bring westerlies of over 100 kilometres per hour) and over 9,000 cows (most of them Friesian and under Berger's watch). The overall result, according to locals, is stress-free animals that produce sweet and creamy milk that is replete in minerals and enzymes, which give Berger the optimum starting point for quality cheese. Overt references to the island's history have even been folded into the brand's packaging, with cheese names like 'Roaring Forties Blue', 'Cape Wickham Double Brie' and 'Lighthouse Blue Brie', as well as a ship motif as the brand logo, King Island Dairy has forged a strong association between produce and provenance.



Figure 5: King Island Dairy Products

If the brand's public profile is anything to go by, Berger's determination has paid off. The Dairy's cheeses have come to embody the very best of Australian produce. Indeed, in mid 2006, Australia's Trade Commission organised a range of Australian gourmet foods to be promoted at whole-food market stores across the United States. The range included wild salmon, fruit pastes, olive oils — and cheeses from King Island Dairy. The promotion not only sought to establish Australia's reputation as a leader in natural and organic products, but, in the wake of the Free Trade Agreement between the two nations, capitalise on Australian producers' growing access to US markets. As quotas rise and tariffs fall, and in a market climate increasingly amenable to the image of 'untouched beauty', King Island Dairy is ideally imagined. Moreover, for the 12,000 or so tourists that come to King Island every year, the Dairy's tasting room — where visitors can sample some 25 varieties of cheese — has become the most popular attraction.

Clean, Green and Exclusive

The more that King Island Dairy marketed its products through images of purity and cleanliness, the easier it became for all of the Island's primary producers to co-opt these favourable associations. Such is the branding phenomenon: the ideas that the Dairy helped link to the Island effectively

overlaid much of its agriculture with similarly constituted imagery. Berger has been at the forefront of this:

Our farmers try to keep everything as natural as possible, with fertilisers and things like that; they don't over-do it or push the farms. It is still very natural compared to the Gippsland area [in Victoria] for example, where farming is still very intensive. We're not there yet, and hopefully we never will be there. If anything, many of our farmers have actually taken a step back and not farmed as much when they've found it's not the right way to go for the Island. (ibid)

Since the mid to late 1990s, all industries on the Island have, as Bernard Lloyd put it, “seen the benefits of being seen to be green” (1995: 7). One of the most conspicuous expressions of this, for instance, has been residents’ growing dependence on wind generated power. Since 1998, three wind turbines on the Huxley Hill wind farm have generated about 18% of the Island’s energy needs. An initiative of Hydro Tasmania, King Island’s growing association with renewable energy advances farmers’ claims that theirs is a greener climate. Moreover, in 2003 a mammoth rechargeable (vanadium flow) battery was installed to further maximise use of this wind energy. When the wind is strong and the turbines generate more electricity than is required, the battery stores the surplus and pumps it out on days when the wind fades and the turbines’ output falls. This innovation is estimated to save about 2000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions per year (Thwaites, 2007: 39).

King Island’s image as an eco-sensitive haven imbues all its produce with an elusive point of difference. This has certainly been the case with King Island beef, which is rapidly assuming the same sort of status as King Island cheese; indeed, at around 100,000, the Island’s beef cattle (20% of Tasmania’s total) certainly outnumber its dairy cattle. Still, both industries draw on the same qualitative appeal: the Island’s year-round grass and frost-free climate ensures that cattle remain healthy; while the absence of motorbikes and helicopters (for rounding up) ensures that they remain relatively stress-free (Reeves, 2002: 38). Like King Island Dairy, the Island’s local meat processor, SBA Foods, has focused on the increasingly lucrative attachment to King Island (it uses the King Island Coat of Arms on all its produce), and is licensed to export to all countries around the world. As with its dairy counterpart, and in the interests of boosting brand value, King Island’s beef producers pursue a two-part policy: protecting the exclusivity of the King Island label, and retaining its connection to a picture of atypical verdancy; and extending this image beyond a privileged few. Billed as the best quality beef in Australia, King Island beef sells for an extra \$(Au)3 a kilogram, while prime cuts fetch up to \$(Au)38 a kilo in Sydney and Melbourne.

Just like King Island Dairy, the Island’s beef growers have been anxious about non-local producers misleading consumers with allusions to King Island. To guard its brand value, the King Island Meat Company took action in August 2006; it launched an advertising campaign, listed authorised stockists on its website, and set up a complaints line to help consumers report instances of deception or duplicity. Clearly, the aim was to not only safeguard the brand but also render it more visible and accessible. To this end, in the same month, King Island beef growers teamed up with the Herbert Adams Company and launched a premium meat pie, using 100% top-grade King Island beef. The deal set a new standard for gourmet pies — taking the Australian culinary cliché upscale — but, importantly, was sold through supermarkets and convenience stores, a move that mirrored Berger’s drive for a more broad-based appreciation of quality.

As the *Orion* voyage cited earlier attests to, King Island is increasingly associated with fine foods. Besides the feted cheeses and beef, visitors can sample its seafood (particularly lobsters, crayfish, oysters and crabs), King Island Mountain Pepper, the King Island Organic Herbs range of teas, King Island Lymwood Honey, as well as a growing range of kelp products. The giant bull kelp fronds that are washed ashore have been processed into Kelp Chutney, Hot Kelp Pickles, Kelp Lemon Spread and Hot & Spicy Kelp Sauce. In name, packaging and product description, these all foreground the King Island origin, a form of localism that owes some debt to the precedent set by King Island Dairy. Moreover, this emphasis on the gourmet is hardly confined to the growers themselves. King Island’s tourism bureau is acutely aware of the foods’ prestige value: the ‘Fine Foods’ link is listed prominently on its online homepage (www.kingisland.org.au), ahead of ‘Flora and Fauna’ and

‘Activities & Tours’, whilst a recent magazine advertisement for Tourism King Island (see below) devotes half of its imagery to local food produce, with the other half showing to a near-empty beach and a lighthouse.¹¹

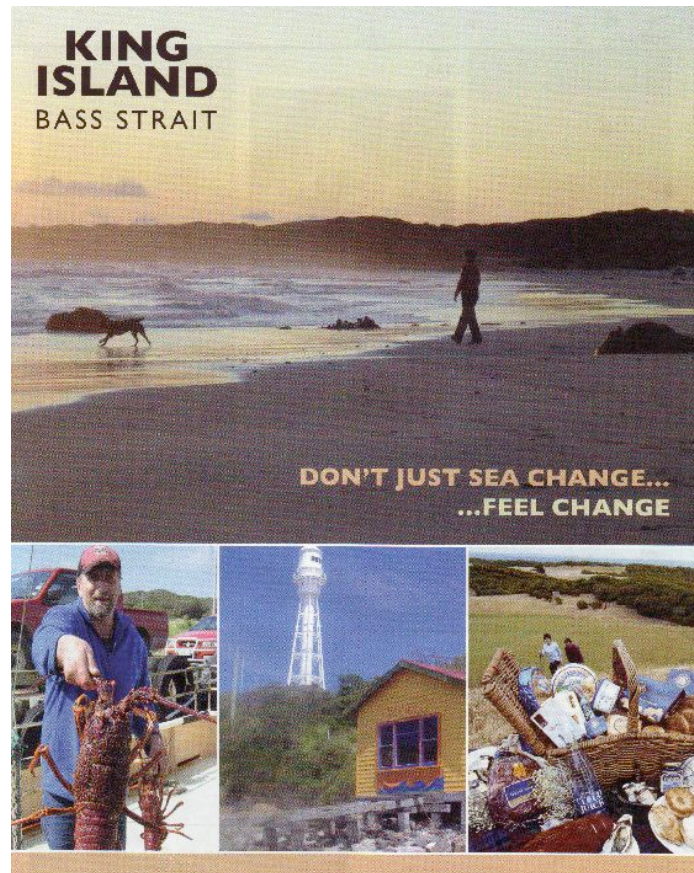


Figure 6: Magazine advertisement for King Island tourism

Clearly, this link is transcending almost every other feature that King Island may boast, and thus cues further enterprise accordingly. Duncan McFie, for example, went (reluctantly) to King Island in 1992 to work as a teacher. However, when he noticed fellow Islanders collecting water from his hostel’s rainwater tanks, on account of it tasting better than the Island’s bore water, McFie decided to switch career and set about researching how rainwater could be collected on a scale big enough to market. The subsequent venture, King Island Cloud Juice, produces about 80,000 bottles a year from rainwater collected on two purpose-built roofs (Vowles, 2006: 13). For McFie, the venture owed much to the likes of Berger:

We were absolutely, consciously riding on the back of the Dairy, the abattoir, and the seafood. They’d done the work. If King Island didn’t have the name that it did have, we would have had a much bigger battle. (interview with the author May 2007)

McFie’s appeals to King Island purity (in that the Roaring 40s purportedly cleanse the rainwater of all contaminants) have proved most profitable overseas — particularly in France, Germany, Portugal, Italy and Spain. In fact, as McFie told the *Hobart Mercury* earlier this year, “An order from one of the world’s best restaurants, El Bulli in Spain, has given [the brand] real gourmet credibility, as has a mention in French *Vogue*” (in Sayer, 2007: 25). In a marketplace as competitively nuanced as that for bottled water, King Island Cloud Juice clearly benefits from the Island’s widely perceived abundance of unspoilt vitality, to the point that even its rainwater is superior.

Costs and Compromises

The idea that King Island products are especially suited for consumers that are particularly sophisticated, discriminating and cashed-up is supremely ironic. Put simply, the producers' claim to an environment that is naturally cleaner than anywhere else in the country — and therefore conducive to superior produce — is at least partly attributable to the sparsity of the population and the simplicity of the infrastructure. Together, these factors have sustained an island lifestyle that sits somewhere between quaintly charming and problematically anachronistic. According to Angela Williams, from King Island Tourism, certain perceptions might help sell quality brie and bottled water around the world, but they raise other concerns on the Island itself:

People recognise and know the three flags — cheese, beef and crayfish. That's good but it's also a concern because people perceive these products as premium and gourmet, and people that don't know King Island think that it's a premium, gourmet destination for visitors. That, for us, is a problem, because we're not like that; we're a working island, an agricultural and rural destination. So, for our [tourist] association, we need to let people out there know that we are not a gourmet destination. It's a 1950s style destination, which we see as a selling point. It's a place to unwind and relax. The fact that we have premium produce is just another element. Our branding must move away from just premium produce, we have a lot of other things too. (interview with the author May 2007)

The challenge for those who benefit from King Island's particular image is to retain those elements that validate their claims to purity and serenity in light of various demands and pressures the Island faces. The rest of this article will canvass a few of these tensions.

First, there is the question of population size. Keen to boost the productive capacity of its dairy, beef, kelp and crayfish industries, in 2006 the King Island Council outlined its desire to see the Island's population double to about 3600 by 2013. The council's strategy involved providing environmentally sustainable solutions for residential development in coastal locations, improving access to the Island, promoting the uniqueness of the Island lifestyle, expanding national industries, solving the inequities that affect living costs on the Island, and providing opportunities for young people to realise their long-term plans (Crisp, 2006: 52). At present, young people must go to Melbourne or Tasmania to complete the last two years of their schooling, or attend university — but the return rate is low, if not negligible. The generational drift is partly explained by King Island's distinct lack of new-millennium attractions. There are no buses, taxis, nightclubs, cinemas, and only three television channels, so entertainment options are limited. The Council's efforts come two years after King Island Dairy launched its own recruitment drive for more farmers; with just 22 farms supplying all its milk, and the Dairy requiring more supplies to match rising demand, it too sought to lure farmers with the promise of guaranteed sales. For the Dairy, outsourcing is not an option as the brand's prestige value has been built on its exclusive reliance on local supplies. As Skuras et al. have found, the perception of 'authenticity' is crucial in consumers' assessment of (and spending on) foods associated with a specific region. That is:

If consumers associate an area with a tradition and culture in the production of the goods, if they consider that the area's physical environment attaches certain qualities to the product or if they have own experience of the area (and of course the product) their spending behaviour is highly influenced (Skuras et al, 2006: 771).

Second, King Island's green image is being tested by plans to reopen the scheelite mine. In late March, China's Hunan Nonferrous Metals Corporation (a Hong Kong listed metals producer) signed a letter of intent with King Island Scheelite Limited to redevelop the mine, with a view to purchasing 50% of its concentrate. King Island Council has already stated that it will only endorse the Scheelite Company's resurgence if it keeps its carbon dioxide emissions to limits set by the Kyoto Protocol. The company, however, has argued that it would be practically impossible to plant the number of trees on King Island (for carbon compensation) that such an arrangement would require. For its part, the Tasmanian Government has agreed that, while tree planting is required, it is not for councillors to

fix the number (Ogilvie, 2007: np). Still, the reopening of the mine is expected to attract at least 100 workers to King Island, something that many on the Island *do* want. For Angela Williams, for instance:

The mine will not be a problem. It'll be in a place where it's existed before [Grassy], a tiny spot. From a historical point of view, the mine was once the salvation of King Island; when the rural industry collapsed many farmers were able to get an income from there. A large number of King Island people have a high regard for the mine, as it was and for what it did. Most people in our association [King Island Tourism Inc.] and that we talk to are most welcoming of the re-opening, for the economy and the population; the downside is very minimal. (interview with the author, May 2007)

Even the environmentally-sensitive Ueli Berger concedes that, although the mine might attract some of his workers by virtue of the (probably) higher income that would be offered, it might have some broader benefits:

I don't know if it's the most important thing here but I guess we can't stop everything. By the same token, I'm sure there'll be some good things coming out of the mine as well, maybe for infrastructure – schools might improve a little bit, which is good for young families. Maybe the money will flow around for certain things, like schools and supermarkets. (interview with the author, May 2007)

Conclusion

Insofar as King Island's producers benefit from an image of unspoilt beauty, its quiet surrounds and leisurely pace make for easy marketing. However, to the extent that these traits are imperilled (either by a population crisis or a revitalised mining industry), residents need to measure the benefits enjoyed against the costs incurred. Given the extent to which King Island producers rely on the local brand identity as their primary selling point, there is an acute and unavoidable vulnerability. As Warren Moran argues, geographical indications (what Moran terms 'appellations') do more than just identify a product with a place; rather, they are a type of 'intellectual property' which producers must use, defend and assert in the face of large multinational corporations. At the same time, Moran writes, this calls for a strong sense of unity and cohesion:

At a very general level the appellation system has a similar function to that of the trade mark. It attempts to identify and publicize the uniqueness of a particular product. It does this not by identifying the product with a particular company or brand but by identifying it with a particular territory. Alternatively, one could say that the brand becomes territorial and therefore available to more than one producer. To be successful... the product deriving from this region must have an overall and identifiable character (Moran, 1993: 266).

In mid February, lightning caused a bushfire crisis that, in the just three weeks, affected 13,000 hectares of the island, most of which was part of the Lavinia State Reserve. With 26 farms threatened, the fires blackened around 10% of the Island and 70% of its natural vegetation. The coastal village of Narracoopa on the east coast was most vulnerable. Scores of fire-fighters were brought in from Tasmania, but their efforts were complicated by King Island's relatively inflexible transport system (the centrepiece of which is a weekly ship to the mainland). Subsequently, fire-fighters relied on community assistance, as locals operated radios and operated as couriers. If nothing else, the situation pinpointed a key tension: King Island must balance the benefits it derives from a perceived (and real) distance from the rest of the country - one that has spawned a suite of favourable assumptions, with the relative vulnerability this distance entails. As idyllic as the image is, King Island's clean, green credentials involve a delicate (if not problematic) negotiation of principles and practicalities.

Endnotes:

1. Over the last decade, food and wine has figured prominently in the marketing of Tasmania. A major component of the state's annual Summer Festival is the seven-day 'Taste of Tasmania' promotion, which spotlights Tasmanian specialties like Barilla Bay oysters, emu fillets, Atlantic salmon, Pink Eye potatoes and various Tasmania wines.
2. Courtesy of *Orion Expedition Cruises'* Customer Services officer (personal communication to the author, 7 August 2007). The visit to the King Island Dairy site is the only scheduled item; others – like the local fisheries, restaurants and farms – depend on the season, availability and interest.
3. Figures 1, 2, 5 and 6 reproduced with the kind permission of King Island Tourism Inc.
4. One gang, led by a Daniel Cooper, reportedly killed some 50 sea elephants in under a month. Given their size, this was a significant catch: the sealers could easily procure around 1100 kilograms of oil in one day from their slaughter – indeed, the larger sea elephants provided between 700 to 750 kilograms of oil each. The oil could be put to a variety of uses: it made mildly flavoured cooking oil; an odourless and long-lasting lamp oil; and a fabric softener.
5. Although this arrangement spawned many marriages and long-term relationships, the practice belongs to a larger story of violence, rape and murder; numerous Tasmanian tribes were raided, with sealers killing the women's male protectors (See Clark, 1986).
6. As Andrew Lemon and Marjorie Morgan point out in *Poor Souls, They Perished*, a turning point came with King Island's first major disaster: the wrecking of the *Neva* convict ship on the Island's northern end in May 1835 and the loss of 224 of its 239 inmates and crew. With the majority of the deaths being women convicts and the children, public sentiment turned. Lemon and Morgan write:
Captain Peck insistently blamed the loss of the Neva on the unexpectedly powerful currents around King Island and on the inaccuracy of the existing charts. It seems no coincidence that soon after the news of the Neva reached England, H. M. S. Beagle was commissioned to proceed to Australian waters and to survey, amongst others, both Bass and Torres Straits (1986: 15).
7. The *Cataraqui* left Liverpool for Port Phillip on 24 April; the barque carried 423 persons, mostly assisted immigrants. On 4 August, in intermittent rain and with his judgement reportedly impaired by some disagreements with the ship's surgeon (See Noble, 1970: 75), Captain Christopher W. Finley ran ashore, just 100 yards off King Island's south-west coast. The only immigrant to survive was Solomon Brown, a 30-year-old labourer from Bedfordshire (See Bateson, 1972: 188).
8. Further prospecting found traces of slate, galena (lead sulphate), monazite (a phosphorous mineral), sphalerite (zinc) and tin – indeed, a tin mine was opened in 1908.
9. Figures 3 and 5 reproduced with the kind permission of National Foods.
10. Brevi linen is a type of bacteria added to a saltwater solution that is then either smeared or scrubbed onto cheese. This helps the cheese mature from the outside in, slowing the growth of white mould, helping the rind retain moisture.
11. This advertisement appeared in an in-flight magazine: *Regional Express* n32, 2007: 7.

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