

# ONE OUT OF THE **POD**

A trans-Pacific partnership is harvesting success for New Zealand's first commercial vanilla growers. Helen Frances reports on the fruits of their labour.



**W**hat does a tropical plantation in Tonga have in common with a bathroom in Tauranga? Heat, the heady scent of vanilla and a thriving family business.

Last year, Heilala Vanilla Reunion Food Company harvested and cured its first crop of 600 New Zealand-grown vanilla pods – believed to be the first commercial yield outside the tropics.

The plants – which are raised in a geothermally heated, double-plastic enclosure in Tauranga – originated from two tiny specimens that Jennifer and Garth Boggiss nurtured in the warmth of their family bathroom.

The couple have also taken delivery of a bumper six tonnes of green vanilla pods from the company's plantation in Tonga, to be dried and processed for sale (both locally and overseas) in the form of fragrant extract, paste, sugar and dried pods.

Garth Boggiss oversees vanilla production in Tauranga.



**Garth Boggiss left software programming to go into the vanilla business. As with wine, different regions produce different flavours. New Zealand's first harvest has a slight chocolate flavour.**

The story of Heilala Vanilla began 10 years ago when Jennifer's father, retired dairy farmer John Ross, put to sea in the 52ft launch he had built himself and headed for Tonga to celebrate his 60th birthday. Over the next few years, Jennifer says, her father fell in love with both the people and land, in particular the island of Vava'u and the Latus family, elders of the village of Utungake.

Setting out to make a difference in the village, Ross enlisted the help of friends from Rotary to build a playground at the school and a house for the teacher, and to replace five homes destroyed by a cyclone. Spouting was installed on many houses so villagers could collect rainwater, reducing the need to fetch water from a central tap. Then he looked to the future.

"They had all this spare land and lots of young people [on the island]," explains Jennifer. "Education is really important there but, once people are educated, what do they do?"

Her father identified vanilla as the best choice of crop to cultivate on land the Latus

family offered him leasehold. In Tonga, the vanilla fragrans vine runs wild and is the only orchid that produces fruit (the vanilla pod). However, producing the pods for harvest is very labour intensive. There are no bees on the islands, so every flower has to be hand-pollinated as soon as it blooms. The pods take nine months to grow; they are then hand-picked, dipped in hot water and dried as part of a curing process that releases their distinctive aroma.

Heilala Vanilla has flourished and now employs around 30 people in the village. The chief's eldest daughter manages the plantation and the company was named after her. Heilala, Tonga's national flower, is a white bloom that turns red when dipped in seawater. The story goes that a mermaid plucked this flower from her hair and gave it to a Tongan chief to offer to the king on his birthday.

The price of vanilla is as extravagant as that story. Fetching \$300 to \$500 per kilo, it's the second-most expensive spice crop in the world after saffron, says Garth, who left software programming to go into business

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with his father-in-law. He and Jennifer had previously tried a stint as avocado growers but found it hard work for a low return per kilo, compared to such a high-value crop as vanilla.

Each member of the family has a clearly defined role. Ross oversees cultivation on the plantation in Tonga while Garth is in charge of growing and product development in Tauranga. Jennifer, a qualified accountant with marketing in her degree, is in charge of sales, marketing and production – with brother Geoff Ross, founder of 42 Below vodka, to call on for advice.

The New Zealand plantation was established five years ago by Heilala as a trial and was a delicate process. Through researchers studying plant viruses at Auckland University, the company sourced two plants, which came into New Zealand as tissue culture from Tonga.

"We then raised them in the bathroom until they got big enough to generate tissue culture again [to cultivate] the 600 plants which went straight into the plastic house," explains Garth.

Their first harvest of Kiwi-grown pods, which have a slight chocolate flavour, is already making a point of difference with chefs around the country.

"The vanilla is unlike any other grown in the world," says Garth. "Each region produces vanilla with different characteristics, just like wine. So to produce a distinctively different New Zealand vanilla is very exciting."

