

UP CLOSE

# Squeezing out waste

*Every year, nearly half of all oranges grown in Australia go to waste, but food charity OzHarvest is working with growers to change that.*

STORY AMANDA BURDON PHOTOS CHRIS CHEN

By Riverina standards, Angelo Santangelo's orange grove at Windsor, NSW, is modest. But the 1500 Washington navel trees, some of them planted by his father 70 years ago, are part of his rich Italian fruit-growing heritage and he takes immense pride in the juicy oranges they produce each year.

So it was a heart-wrenching choice Angelo faced in 2010 – to continue dumping oranges he couldn't find a viable market for, or bulldoze the historic orchard altogether. "We were sending oranges to the Sydney markets and it was costing us \$7 to pick, pack, wash and transport an 18kg box and we were only getting back \$4-5 each box," the 65-year-old says. "We couldn't give the oranges away, and I seriously thought about ripping all the trees out, but I couldn't do it; orange-growing was in my blood. My father and grandfather had grown oranges and my great-grandfather in Italy. I had grafted some of the trees myself."

In the quest for produce perfection and uniformity, the big wholesalers and supermarkets were dictating fruit size and appearance. Anything with a little blemish or imperfection, like black spots, discolouration or signs of wind-rub, was deemed second grade by their standards, even though it didn't affect the quality of the fruit inside.

"When I was 14 or 15 we would send everything to the markets – blemished fruit, small fruit, large fruit, everything, and it would all be sold," Angelo says. "But all of a sudden they would only accept the prime produce. No-one can consistently grow fruit or vegetables of a precise size and shape; it's impossible. Nature's not like that. We were dumping bins and bins of oranges that the market didn't want. They might have looked a bit rough, but the taste was still sensational."

Angered by the wastage, Angelo began investigating alternative uses for his "perfectly good fruit". That's when he struck up a relationship with the food salvage charity OzHarvest, and for six years Angelo donated his oranges to them. Each June, teams of volunteer pickers would visit Cornwallis Farm and pick oranges for inclusion in OzHarvest fruit boxes for needy people.

"It made me feel great," Angelo says. "Everybody works hard for their fruit and I hate wasting it, especially if somebody else can benefit."

Angelo's goodwill parlayed into a business proposition last year when the social enterprise arm of OzHarvest – ForPurposeCo – began trialling orange juice vending machines in Sydney. The venture has proven so successful that there are now 50 brightly coloured Juice For Good machines scattered throughout the city and ForPurposeCo has negotiated to buy all Angelo's oranges this year. "It effectively means that I can continue growing oranges," he says. "We should both come out of it with a little pocket money."

Head of marketing for Juice For Good, Louise Tran, says Angelo will supply navels for part of the year and they will rely on a larger Griffith valencia orange-grower for the rest of the year.

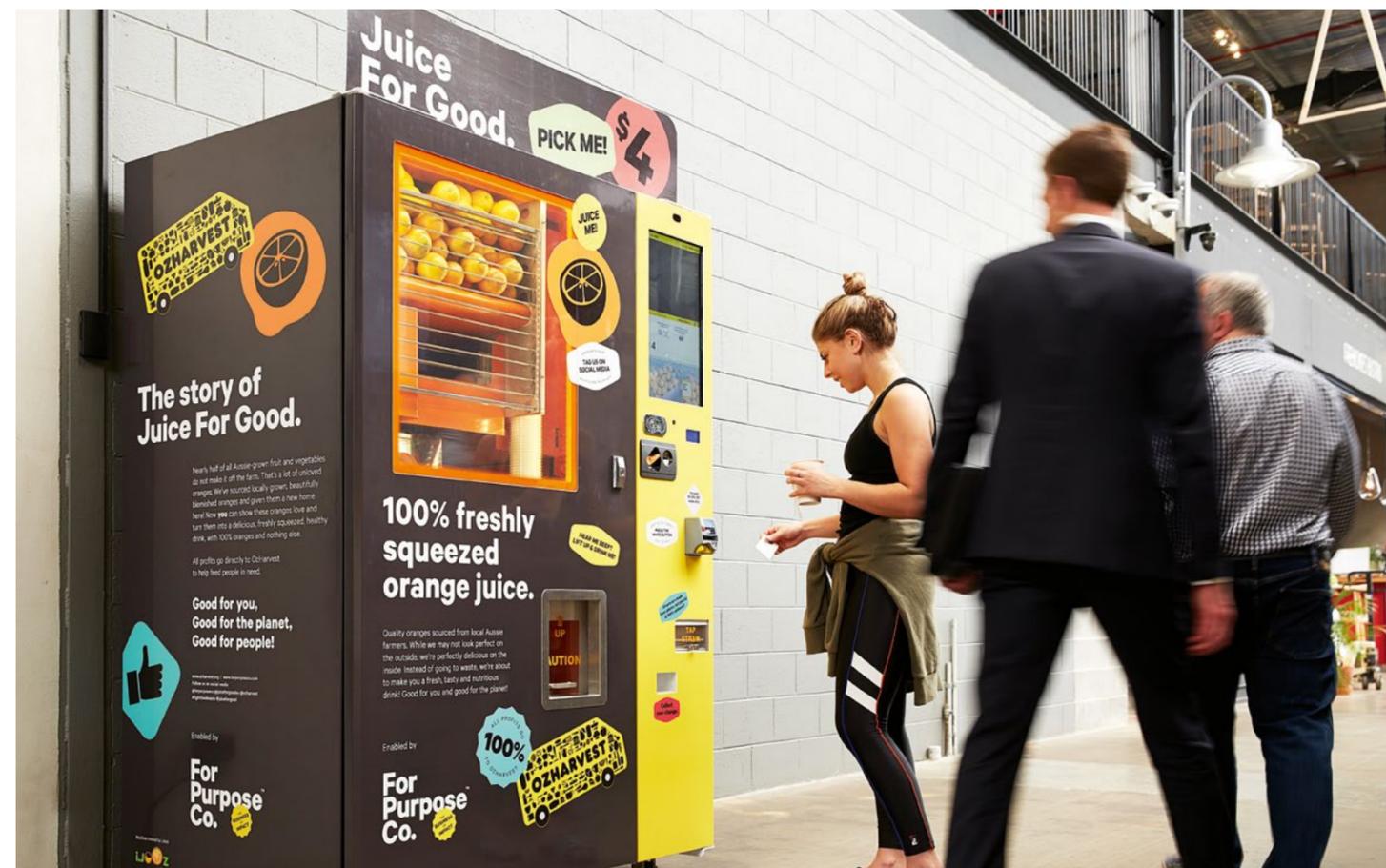
"We are pretty much assured a year-round supply for our Sydney machines now, but when we look to expand into Queensland we would love to work with local farmers in that state," Louise says. "We want to focus on local farms supplying local machines as the business expands."

Although still small in terms of volume, Juice for Good is hitting a sweet spot with customers. "We have so far juiced one million oranges [200,000 cups], but that is the equivalent of close to 200 tonnes of oranges that would have otherwise gone to waste because of their imperfections," Louise says. "We're proud to be doing our little bit to reduce food waste, and the popularity of the juice continues to grow."

ForPurposeCo rescues the washed and sized oranges from Angelo's farm, and transports them to a central Sydney warehouse, from where operators head out each day to service and refill the vending machines. Five to six "beautifully blemished" oranges are squeezed right before the customer's eyes to produce the chilled juice, and 100% of profits go to support OzHarvest.

"We want customers to know that it takes the same amount of effort and time and money to grow an imperfect orange as it does one that is glossy and uniform and considered 'perfect'," Louise says. "It's an educational process, to encourage people to value their food, no matter what it looks like on the outside."

Fourth-generation fruit-grower James Duffell, of Prickle Hill, south-west of Coleambally, NSW, supplied oranges for Juice For Good's vending machine trial. James urges consumers to rethink their practice of "buying with their eyes". >



TOP: Windsor orchardist Angelo Santangelo has now entered into a commercial arrangement with OzHarvest; OzHarvest's fresh orange juice vending machines.



“What about the fruit you reject when you are shopping at the supermarket?” James says. “We need to consider what’s going to happen to it. People might say they support sustainability and reducing food waste but their decisions don’t reflect that, which is why education is so important.”

“There will always be imperfection because farmers are constantly gambling on the weather. All your growing is susceptible to whether you’ve had sufficient water or not, or hail or not, or frosts, disease or pests. It all impacts on the fruit. But if the fruit didn’t have those imperfections it would look like plastic.”

Juice For Good is pleased with the early success of the vending machines and is looking to add more to the network, provided locations stack up financially. “We need to sell 30-40 cups a day to make a machine viable, to cover

the costs of stocking and servicing the machine every day, so there needs to be sufficient foot traffic,” Louise says.

“We’ve had all sorts of ideas thrown at us, from apple and grapefruit juice to even lemonade. At this stage, we’re sticking with orange juice because we know we can source oranges year-round, that people are enjoying their juice and that it’s a great, healthy product.”

ForPurposeCo is, however, exploring a range of other food waste reduction initiatives that aim to support local farmers. “We are working with avocado farmers to see if we can potentially reduce avo waste,” Louise says. “And we would love to learn more about the challenges other farmers are facing and help them to come up with solutions for tackling waste at the farm level. We are looking at what innovation is happening around the world



*An OzHarvest volunteer picks oranges on Cornwallis Farm at Windsor, NSW.*

to see what ideas we can bring to Australia.”

Angelo, for one, is pleased to hear that such collaboration with farmers is in the pipeline.

“Whatever the fruit or vegetable, horticulturists grow them for a whole year or season, water them and nurture them, and then all of a sudden might find that there’s not a demand for half their crop,” he says. “Apples, peaches, bananas are the same. You can’t say to a tree, ‘Just grow this size and this shape and colour’; that’s not nature.”

He would like to see further research into alternative uses for blemished or excess fruit, but in the meantime is drinking in the success of the Juice For Good model.

“I’m only a small grower, but I’m proud as punch that I’m contributing to this scheme,” he says. “I’m telling all my friends that my oranges are in a juicing machine in Darling Harbour, helping to cool down visitors from all over the world. It beats anything that’s shipped into the country in big bladders from Brazil or Argentina.”

And to consumers he has a simple message. “Open your eyes to what’s available; buy odd fruit if it’s available, or go to local farmers’ markets and ask growers for their imperfect produce,” Angelo says. “It doesn’t taste any different and might even taste better than the ‘perfect’ fruit.”

