



Ayes is for apples



Phil Acock

PHIL ACOCK doesn't pretend to call himself a farmer. "I'm a businessman. Leave me out there to cope and I'd struggle," he says, gazing from his comfortable corporate offices over 80 acres of Bramley apple orchards, on which the family firm's reputation is founded.

This year in particular, it's as well he left cultivation at Fourayes Farm at Bicknor in Kent to those far better qualified, because the English apple industry has had its pips well and truly squeezed.

Farm manager Ian Witherden, who at 57 has seen a deal of bad weather in his time, estimates the crop, which started coming off the trees on 3 September, would be between 30 to 40 per cent down, thanks to one of the worst seasons for pollination and ripening on record. Bees wouldn't fly, fruits were misshapen or marked by hail and in some areas of the UK the damage was so bad, avenues of top fruit are likely to be grubbed.

It rather goes to prove Phil's point that consistent profit in the apple industry is hard to come by. "It's up and down like a yo-yo and I didn't want to keep waiting for the good years," he says. That's why the majority of Fourayes' 90 staff who trundle down the narrow farm lane every day are there not to grow apples, but to process them, and why, unlike many top fruit farmers this year, Phil won't be making a loss.

In fact, in the 15 years since Phil, a production engineer by training, took over the business his grandfather started, Fourayes' turnover has quadrupled from £2.2 million to more than £10 million. More than £700,000 of privately funded investment in the largest single apple processing plant in the UK is intended to

ensure the numbers keep going up.

Next year is the 60th anniversary of Fourayes Farm (the four As being the four Acocks who started it) - and it will be the 50th year since the first of their Bramleys were sliced and diced for canners. Back in 1963, canning plants monopolised the year-round market for a culinary fruit with a notoriously short fresh season, but, never slow to spot an opportunity, it wouldn't be long before the Acocks were offering customers Bramleys in new and more versatile long-life formats.

"In those days the Bramley apple season was very short - not more than three months from October to December. We went from supplying fresh sliced and diced to manufacturing ready-to-use apple fillings, using hot and cold mix processes, and now aseptic processing," says Phil.

The last gives manufacturers the choice of an ambient-stored clean-label product with 12-month shelf life,



achieved by a process of flash-cooking and cooling.

Mr Kipling's exceedingly good Bramley apple pies, Marks & Spencer's own label and the New Covent Garden Soup Company are now among a long list of well-known brands into whose products Fourayes' jams, purées and whole fruit fillings find their way.

"I'm always looking for another opportunity - that can come from walking around supermarkets or going abroad and seeing what they are doing there and from talking to customers," says Phil. "The aseptic line came about from talking to one particular customer who was importing aseptic apple purée. They were interested in provenance."

When it comes to unique selling points that's something the Bramley has in spades. No one outside the UK has ever successfully managed to commercialise a Bramley crop. "Probably because they can't make a go of it on the poor returns Bramley growers get," says Phil ruefully. "That causes us a concern long term. I do not like to see prices at the cost of production. I like to see a fair return so these growers can invest."

Fourayes' own harvest of around 1,300t all goes into low-oxygen long-term storage to keep the factory churning when the 10-11,000t of bought-in apples run out in June. This year the last Bramley was taken out of storage on 31 August the day before I visited - just as the delayed 2012 crop came in.

English Apples and Pears has estimated the total 2012 apple harvest to be down by 17 per cent with a knock-on 18 per cent rise in the price of fresh fruit on the shelves. Manufacturers can't expect to be immune, says Phil.

"It's going to be the shortest crop we've

Photos courtesy of Fourayes Farm



seen since 2003 (when world apple production fell to 43m tonnes and Bramleys plummeted to just over 73,000t). My prediction will be 60-70,000t in the UK compared to 90,000t. That means very expensive apples and a lot of hard work has got to go into sourcing them. We are going to have to pass all those costs on and they are not going to like that."

It might, however, be something manufacturers have to get used to, because if there is a silver lining in the dark cloud that's hung over the top fruit industry this year, it's that over-supply of Bramleys - especially from Northern Ireland - could be at an end and prices will strengthen.

"We are probably going to see a few years where the crop might be on the tight side," says Phil. "The Irish supply in particular needs to shrink. They have

“ “ grown miles too much for their market. Their tonnage

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is not far behind what we have in England and they haven't the sales for that. I think you can have a good time with the supermarkets, but if you are in a market where there is any sort of oversupply of that product, you are going to get hammered."

Fellow Kent grower Nigel Bardsley can vouch for that. Last year, he hit the headlines when retailers, awash with foreign plums, refused to make space for the Victorias groaning on his trees.

exclusively local pickers, will be filling next year's bins from an increasing number of trees grown on wire trellis, a system that promises more consistent yields. And why?

"We are the single biggest Bramley buyer in the country," says Phil. "It's essential we continue to grow ourselves, so we know our raw material inside out and can talk to customers about what to expect from the growing season. We also know our suppliers' pains because we are experiencing the same ourselves."

He might not call himself a farmer, but he's the kind of production engineer you wish there were more of.

Written by Sue Scott

