

# Packaging perfected to create crab delicacy

When iconic chef Tetsuya Wakuda took a liking to Ceas Crabpak Spanner Crab meat, founders Neville and Helen Rockliff thought their marketing prayers had been answered. Not that they were surprised. “Spanner Crab is a real delicacy – how much produce do you get that feeds on prawns and scallops?” Neville Rockliff asks. It is a question he posed seven years earlier during a recreational fishing trip in Queensland. “I thought they tasted beautiful; the difficulty was removing the meat from the shell,” he says.

Frustrated that the domestic market was lumbered with rejects, giving Spanner Crab a poor reputation locally while the premium product was shipped to Asia, Neville Rockliff decided to tackle both challenges head-on and moved his family from Tasmania, where his parents established Petuna Seafoods, to Mooloolaba on the Sunshine Coast.

Ceas Crabpak has since evolved as the largest Spanner Crab producer in Australia and now employs three of the Rockliffs’ adult children. The company holds most of the quota licence for the Queensland

Spanner Crab fishery, which was the first to be branded ‘sustainable’ by the Australian Government under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*. Neville Rockliff says the stronghold also ensures “more consistent supply and a higher quality product”.

The Spanner Crab is native to Queensland’s pristine tropical waters. It inhabits intertidal waters to depths of 100 metres and is usually found buried in sand.

Caught on traps called dillies – a method that eliminates bycatch – the crabs are immediately placed in tanks and sprayed with a chilled saltwater mist, which slows their metabolism and retains moisture until they arrive at the company’s processing factory.

Neville Rockliff experimented with water temperature over several years to develop a method to remove the raw meat from the shell. “We use only top quality crabs and 100 per cent pure product for processing,” he says.

Since introducing packaging to reflect the Ceas Crabpak products’ premium status, demand has continued to rise in Australia. “When we introduced Spanner Crab to Tetsuya, he was immediately smitten and now uses it in ravioli dishes and crab custard at his famous Sydney restaurant,” Neville Rockliff says.

“It’s also delicious with scrambled eggs; tossed in garlic and butter on crusty bread; in dip with ocean trout, cream cheese and chives; or eaten raw as carpaccio sprinkled with lemon juice. It’s so versatile.”

Between 60 and 70 per cent of the catch is exported live to Asia, while the remaining value-added products (meat only; backless raw and cooked; and whole raw and cooked) are sold through specialty seafood retailers, delis and supermarkets in most Australian capital cities. **F**

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## Pipis move from bait to sought-after seafood

Traditionally sold as bait to recreational fishermen, Pipis are now on menus throughout the country, thanks to members of South Australia’s Goolwa Pipi Harvesters Association (GPHA) who are seizing untapped opportunities for value-adding.

By removing sand from the Pipis, which ingest the material during filter feeding, harvesters have transformed the once humble Pipi (or cockle) from a product sold only as fish bait into seafood for human consumption.

GPHA, which is chaired by Roger Edwards, represents nine Pipi licences in the Goolwa region, responsible for more than 70 per cent of the historical harvest. Under new quota management arrangements designed to protect the resource, the industry currently harvests 300 tonnes a year. However, this is expected to increase in future years on the back of science being conducted by industry and the SA Research and Development Institute.

GPHA members worked with former

Australian Liberal politician Alexander Downer and made significant investments in processing technology to gain access to the substantial European market, where Pipis are highly sought-after for paella and marinara dishes.

One of the first companies in Australia to realise the industry’s commercial potential, Coorong Cockles Pty Ltd, provides contract processing facilities for GPHA members, opening export sales opportunities for even the smallest fishers.



Neville and Helen Rockliff, founders of Ceas Crabpak.



Spanner Crab: now locally recognised as a delicacy.



Renowned Australian chef Tetsuya Wakuda prepares a dish with Spanner Crab meat.

Pipis are harvested from a remote beach 120 kilometres south of Adelaide, where the Murray River meets the ocean. The industry harvests about three tonnes a day from November to May, which are then transferred to processing facilities where they are suspended in water and de-sanded.

Pipis are sold fresh during the on-season, frozen stocks are available year-round and the GPHA is exploring gas flushing opportunities to extend the life of chilled product. Coorong Cockles director Tom Robinson says his company has recently commenced air freighting live product to

the EU and hopes to expand this area of the business in coming seasons.

“A large percentage of cockle industries around the globe have either been overfished or the cockles, which are filter feeders, have absorbed contaminants,” Tom Robinson says. “But South Australian Pipis are regarded as one of the best in the world because they are harvested in pristine waters.”

Tom Robinson is putting his marketing background to good use, talking up the industry’s ‘clean and green’ attributes to generate interest. However, he says Australians of Asian or European origin

remain the strongest domestic customers.

Asian customers prefer the larger Pipis, which represent about 30 per cent of the total catch, while Europeans, fortuitously, favour smaller ones that constitute about 70 per cent of the haul. “The export opportunities are significant because it obviously takes less time to grow a small Pipi than a large one,” Tom Robinson says.

GPHA members, including Coorong Cockles, rely on wild catch but are exploring aquaculture opportunities, which could potentially help secure the long-term sustainability of the industry. **F**