

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF A REMARKABLE AVOCADO TREE

Merrinee Farm owners John and Lindy Williams reflect on the history of Tamborine Mountain's largest and oldest avocado orchard, and how its crop from a thousand trees began with a single seed.

The story begins with avocado industry pioneer Alec Kidd, who was John's father-in-law. Born in 1917 and moving to the farm with his family as an infant, Alec spent much of his childhood on what was, at the time, a citrus orchard.

Following the death of his father a few years prior, Alec left school at 13 to help his mother run the farm. Next door to the orchard was the Inglethorpe Hotel, where an avocado tree grew.

The tree on the Inglethorpe grounds is believed to be a variety native to Guatemala, and in 1934 Alec purchased 20 of its seeds for a shilling, to plant as a windbreak for the citrus orchard.

Alec observed the 20 young avocado trees as they grew, to determine which was the strongest. When one particular tree thrived, it was selected to become the 'parent' of the future trees he hoped to produce.

Several years later, the parent tree began to produce fruit of its own. From its seeds, Alec planted 25 young trees, which grew into Merrinee Farm's first commercial crop.

"When you grow an avocado tree from a seed it can take several years to fruit," Lindy said. "It would have taken many years to start producing more trees for planting, and a great deal of patience."

The tree which grew from the initial seed is now 86 years old; its trunk a remarkable four metres in circumference, its branches capable of producing over a tonne of avocados in one picking.

Alec Kidd became the inaugural president of the Australian Avocado Federation (now Avocados Australia) in 1974. In 1989, with a life-long dedication to the industry behind him, Alec was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his service to horticulture.

John Williams, who now owns the farm with his wife Lindy, purchased the property from Alec to maintain the orchard and continue the monumental work he started.

Like his father-in-law, John grew up on a farm on Tamborine Mountain. Having established his own successful irrigation business in the 1970s, John's expertise in his field enabled him to design and install the orchard's irrigation system, which has been operating for 40 years.

Along with the farm itself, Alec passed

to John his extensive knowledge of the industry, forged over a lifetime of experience.

John's involvement in horticulture prompted him to become secretary of the Tamborine Mountain Local Producers Association and chairman of the Tamborine Mountain Water Advisory Committee, among a number of other prominent positions in the industry.

While Merrinee Farm has undergone some changes in response to an evolving market, John and Lindy preserved the history of the orchard.

Though every tree on the property exists because of the original Guatemalan seedling, the farm is now largely comprised of Hass avocado trees, with this popular variety accounting for 90 per cent of the orchard.

"To keep the farm commercially viable, I've had to move a lot over to Hass, because the other varieties aren't as strong as the Hass in the market," John said. "But I've left samples of all the other varieties, so the heritage is still here."

These 'other varieties' include Merrinee Farm's own Kidd Variety, as well as the Sharwil variety, which is developed on Tamborine Mountain. Other unique varieties include Fuerte, Hazzard, Wurtz, Pinkerton, Tompkin, Reed and Choquette.

Interestingly, many of these varieties were once unmarketable. However, in the wake of the nation's 'Smashed Avo' obsession, Australia's rekindled love of avocado has sparked an awareness and interest that has put the unique varieties back on the market.

"I can remember some of the varieties were never picked for market," Lindy said. "Now we pick and on-sell all of them."

Merrinee Farm has a long-standing connection with Anderson Horticulture, a nursery based in Duranbah, northern New South Wales. The connection spans two generations and began when Alec Kidd and Mr Anderson would exchange avocado seeds.



Daddy of them all... at 86 years, this magnificent and historic avocado tree dwarfs Lindy Williams. It could go on producing fruit for another 200 years.

Today, John Williams and Graham Anderson, the second generation of avocado growers, continue the tradition of this exchange, with the seeds being transported directly to Duranbah to be used exclusively by Anderson Horticulture.

The seed exchange with Anderson Horticulture means that the tree's offspring are now growing not only in John and Lindy's orchard, but across the country.

"That tree has produced literally millions of avocado trees that are planted across Australia," John said.

Despite their immersion in the industry, John and Lindy have not grown tired of the taste of avocado. Rather, it has given them an appreciation of the fruit and the qualities which make it unique; for example, the fact that avocados do not start to ripen until they have been picked from the tree, and that the trees are self-pollinating.

At 86 years, the age and size of the original tree is a testimony to the endurance of what was once no more than a seedling, and the tenacity of the family responsible for it. As avocado trees can live for as long as 300 years, this extraordinary tree will likely continue to thrive for many years to come.

ABBY WILLIAMS