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Jacqueline Smith: Snail farmers outpace the obstacles

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It seemed easy, but three years later, Raewynne Achten can confirm that snail farming is anything but.

Achten, a Hawkes Bay mother of two, was looking for a venture to supplement the family income and use their 0.8ha of land when she stumbled across the idea of growing snails for restaurants.

A few years earlier her sister-in-law had mentioned a newspaper article about a woman farming snails in New Zealand.

At the time, Achten failed to track down the article, and the idea was relegated to a passing thought.

Then in 2005, she began researching business ideas and came across an Australian snail farmer who was selling an online manual.

"So I bought that and it just sounded so easy. Within a week I had built my first snail bed, and I was away," she says.

After a few days of rising at the crack of dawn to pick up the escapees, Achten realised snail farming was not child's play.

Two months after the first round of baby snails hatched, birds wiped them out.

Then, during the hot Hawkes Bay summer, the young snails died crawling up the scorching corrugated iron sides of their home before Achten added a shade cloth.

She went back to the internet and contacted agricultural, restaurant and chefs' associations but could not find any mention of New Zealand snail farmers, so decided to visit the Australian snail farmer. And she convinced friend Jaye Sims to join her.

Before flying, Achten conducted a little market research. She found New Zealand chefs were using imported canned snails but were enthusiastic about the prospect of serving locally grown snails.

Food Hawkes Bay put Achten in touch with a local chef who encouraged her to pursue her venture.



Raewynne Achten (left) and Jaye Sims have had to learn quickly about farming snails. Photo / Hawke's Bay Today

It turned out the Australian snail farmer had altered her methods quite considerably from the handbook.

Achten changed her own methods right away, and with Sims as a business partner, Silver Trail Snails was soon raising enough juicy escargots to enter the restaurant market.

Sims has the capacity to grow 400,000 snails, while Achten may reach her limit this season with her projected harvest of 100,000.

The pair are both out of bed at the crack of dawn to beat the birds and hunt down any escapees. At night, they spray water over their pastures to encourage the snails to come out and eat.

Their free-range snails are fed vegetables and their pastures are pesticide-free. They are selected for size and colour and sold young and plump.

Each snail is valuable – Silver Trail Snails are sold to restaurants for \$18 a dozen to recoup the labour and production costs. A tin of imported snails costs \$15.

"It's very labour-intensive and more so than I had imagined it's been a huge learning curve because we didn't know anything about snails before we started," Achten says.

During the harvesting season from October to late April, Achten and Sims meet on Sundays to pickle the snails in a rented commercial kitchen.

Their next investment will be a commercial kitchen of their own, and Achten says they will be needing one soon if the bumper 2007–08 season is anything to go by – the company began turning a profit but their 20,000 snails did not quite cover demand.

"A comment that's come from some chefs is they look different, we don't gut them so they are still in their spiral and visually they are beautiful," Achten says.

Silver Trail Snails are also pickled and sold in gourmet food stores a jar of 30 snails for \$49 and are proving a popular addition to dinner parties.

Achten believes she has broken into the snail business at just the right time, thanks to recent media reports pointing out the health benefits of snails.

She hopes to extend sales through more restaurants and also into supermarkets.

Food festivals have proven a great way of warming people to the idea of eating snails.

Silver Trail Snails may also look to export the pickled snails, which have a shelf life of five months.

But Achten says the greatest marketing challenge is getting through the price barrier. Chefs buy snails in springwater, and at the moment it is too costly to send them to the South Island, let alone abroad.

Achten is not aware of any New Zealand competition, though she expects this will not be the case forever.

But she warns anyone thinking of breaking into the market that it's harder than it looks, and "there's not a lot of room here".

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