

DOWN TO BUSINESS

Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic has been good for Pure Foods Tasmania. AMANDA LOVELL reports

MICHAEL Cooper recalls vividly the time he donned a koala suit in sweltering temperatures to give away mineral water in the Hobart mall to help promote his parents' struggling business.

"We didn't even have the money to put batteries in the fan that was inside the koala head so I was just sweating inside there, kids were poking me in the butt trying to take the mineral water we were giving away," Mr Cooper, now head of Pure Foods Tasmania, recalls.

He was 21 years old and had traded a life of sailing the world for the koala suit.

"I thought if this is life then I am done with this and I am getting out of here, I have got to get back to the US."

But Mr Cooper didn't leave.

Instead, together with his mother and father, he spent the next 28 years growing the Mr Juicy company, later known as Juicy Isle, from just the three of them to 150 staff and a turnover of \$60m a year.

It became the largest provider of organic apple juice and one of the largest beverage distributors in the country.

It was sold in 2015 to the Myer family, while Michael stayed on for another three years before he decided his time was up.

"They had ideas, they weren't necessarily the same as my ideas but they were good to the business and good to me," he says of the new owners.

Mr Cooper's parents started Mr Juicy in 1971.

He remembers he and his sisters would spend every night after finishing their homework sticking labels on 100 bottles each.

"Back in those days you were literally licking them with your tongue and sticking them on the bottles.

"Mum and Dad would take them to work the next day and fill them up with orange juice.

"It was the time when orange juice got delivered to your door in glass bottles like milk and you left the money."

When Mr Cooper finished school in 1986 he followed his passion for sailing and became a sailmaker. It was a choice that saw him travel the world and enjoy meccas such as Newport Island in the US, the home of the America's Cup.

"I was living this great life and then one day I got a phone call from Dad saying things were tough back home

and I needed to go back.

"I said don't be silly, I'm not doing that.

"A couple of hours later mum rang and in a few days I was back working in the business!"

That's when the koala suit came out.

Fortunately for Mr Cooper and his parents, things only improved, and they spent years growing the Juicy Isle brand and business.

When they sold it some 40 years after it had started, Mr Cooper thought it might be time to take it easy.

It lasted three weeks.

"I thought well, I will do the stay-at-home dad thing.

"It didn't really go to plan, there weren't enough hours in the day and the kids started to say 'this isn't working'."

Mr Cooper applied for some board positions and ended up with six before going full time with Pure Foods Tasmania.

Formed in 2015, it was started by the same group of people who founded baby food company Bellamys.

Mr Cooper said the plan was for PFT to be the next Bellamys.

When Mr Cooper joined the board in 2017 he said the company was at a crossroads.

"I gave them a few options which included selling and recouping costs as well as listing and going big.

"They chose the last option which was the hardest work but had the greatest potential."

The board found an old defunct company and bought the shell enabling them to list on the stock exchange. Within a few short months the share price jumped from 20c to \$1.20 and has since stabilised around the 80c mark.

"There has been phenomenal growth in a short period of time," Mr Cooper said.

The company recently announced its half year results recording a 51 per cent increase amid the COVID pandemic. It owns brands including Tasmanian Premium Pate, Woodbridge Smokehouse and Daly Potato Company.

"COVID has been really good for us," Mr Cooper said. "It put the focus on food and beverage provenance and traceability and that has become a massive thing for consumers."

Mr Cooper said Pure Foods Tasmania prided itself on creating a point of difference with other food producers which gave it an edge with customers.

Food



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Michael Cooper at the Pure Foods Tasmania Mornington factory.