

At a glance



Who: Gaethan Cutri

What: Stone fruit

Why: Strict performance management

Where: Swan Hill

Report: LESLIE WHITE

Fruit formula figures

THE Cutri Fruit slogan is "A passion for fruit" — and you soon realise why.

Over the course of a morning spent with *The Weekly Times*, Gaethan Cutri ate countless peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums and cherries.

"Can we talk and eat?" he asked before a tour of the 280ha farm at Woorinen, near Swan Hill.

"There are 65 cherry trees here ... not for selling, just for eating," Gaethan said.

"I love stone fruit. I don't eat much else during stone fruit season ... I don't eat breakfast or lunch, I just eat fruit."

The Cutri family markets two main lines — Cutri Fruit and Tasti Fruit.

The business tracks how many kilograms of fruit are produced a tree and a hectare, as well as the prices paid and all sales.

Trees are monitored for how many pieces of fruit are grown before and after thinning, and even how many pieces of fruit are grown on each lateral branch.

"We have key performance



Branching out: Gaethan Cutri has a passion for stone fruit.

indicators (KPIs) on different varieties for pruning — how many laterals we want to leave per tree, how many limbs, the length of the laterals; everything we do we've put numbers around," Gaethan said.

"The workers need to prune within 20 per cent of their KPIs ... we say we want laterals 25cm long and we want 80 on this tree.

"I've got little diagrams for

everything, the Cutri fruit way of thinning and pruning."

In previous years, the business exported about 60 per cent of its produce — mostly white nectarines, which make up about 70 per cent of production — to Taiwan.

After the Taiwanese market closed, Cutri focused on Hong Kong, which now takes 40 per cent of produce.

Coles accounts for nearly half

of all sales with Safeway taking 10 per cent.

Gaethan said the only way he could manage such a large farm was to keep it simple.

"Our rows are unusual in that they're so long, about 500 to 600 metres," Gaethan said.

"I like the idea of planting larger volumes, I want less varieties and larger plantations of each — it's just easier to manage and easier to market.

"Consistency, simplicity, everything the same, lots of one variety; these things all make it easy."

Soil has been dug out between the rows, forming a depression. The extra topsoil has been put under the trees.

The depression helps keep frost off the fruit as it settles between the trees at the lowest point.

Frost-preventing fans, run by gas, pull warmer air from the inversion layer above the trees and mix it with the cool air on the ground, to raise the average temperature.

Cutri is planting another 70ha of apricots to focus on the domestic market — the project

will cost more than \$1 million, not including land or water.

Gaethan said harvesting the apricots in November would even out the harvest season, which sees all hands on deck between late December and February.

The focus on the domestic market came from Gaethan's belief that it may take years to win back export rights to Taiwan.

The operation uses on average five megalitres a hectare on double-line drippers about 30cm apart and delivering 1.8 litres a session.

The drips deliver eight to 12 litres an hour a tree, with the length of watering varying according to the time of year.

Most irrigation is done at night on a computer schedule with soil-moisture probes monitoring every variety.

Radio signals are sent to the computer every five minutes to chart soil moisture.

This means there is no wastage of water and nutrients.

"We use a truckload of water in the four weeks before picking, but if you put too much

water on them the tree get extension growth and you get more tree than fruit," Gaethan said.

The business spent an extra \$500,000 on water this year.

Cutri employs up to 70 people, some on contract labour.

Many are paid by the tree "so if they work bloody hard they can make a lot of money".

Gaethan believes this system attracts better workers.

Family members also take overseas trips to inspect new varieties and learn from other farmers.

A pheromone trial is in progress in a bid to deter the pest beetle capophilus.

"It's about reducing the chemicals on the product," Gaethan said.

"This region is renowned for its hours of daylight, no clouds and strong penetration of the sun.

"This growing region, we believe, grows the best fruit in the country from mid November through to January."