

# Making every step fruitful at Swan Hill

## THE PRODUCER

By GEMMA GADD

**P**ACKING fruit in sweltering Mallee heat seems an unlikely place to find a litigation lawyer.

But for Gaethan Cutri the decision to move back home to run his family's stonefruit farm, Cutri Fruit, at Woorien, near Swan Hill, was a natural one.

"I enjoy the freedom of working for myself, making decisions and implementing strategies for the future

containers of fresh fruit every day.

Already intimately acquainted with the operation – Mr Cutri managed the packing and distribution side of the business at just 15 – he set about reinventing "the Cutri Fruit way" with wife Nicole.

They met when Nicole, once a Sydneysider, was working in corporate communications and have been back on the farm together for three and a half years.

"We worked day and night to develop systems and processes around every aspect of the business, beginning with process-

company image (including new website, company logo and bold green packaging) and, most importantly, simplicity and science.

In a business restructure that took two years, they conducted internal audits (while the business continued to run), scrutinising occupational health and safety issues – an area familiar to Mr Cutri after his time spent working on multi-million-dollar personal injury cases.

"We were already compliant, but because I am aware of the consequences we sought to identify all the possible risks and make improvements," he said.

Mr Cutri has developed spreadsheets which specify the number of trees of each variety and the age, root stock and location of each tree. He has used this information to record phonological data and growing characteristics of each variety.

"There are numbers on everything: the number of laterals (fruit-bearing branches) per tree, the butt circumference, the number of fruit pieces of fruit per tree – all of which are used to determine the productivity and profitability of each variety."

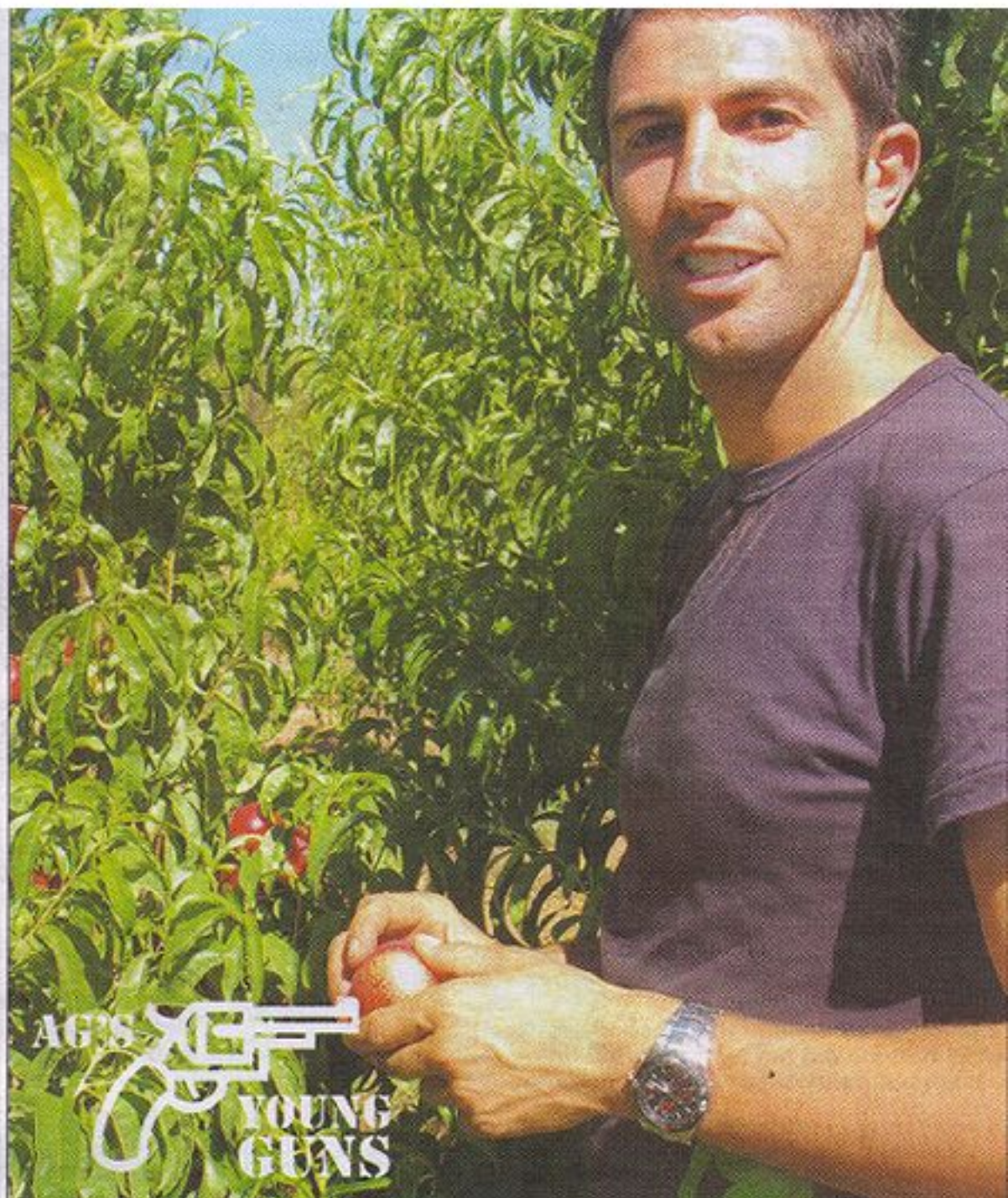
The additional electronic data has given Cutri Fruit greater forecasting ability to service its demanding markets – a crucial element to the business.

About 25 per cent of the product is exported to China, Thailand, Singapore, France, the UK and the United Arab Emirates and the rest sold domestically through the major supermarket chains.

But revamping the business has only been part of the challenge for Mr Cutri.

Since returning to the farm, a key export market has closed, the seasons have been challenging (Cutri Fruit bought 300 megalitres of temporary water this year alone) and input costs have risen.

"If we can not just survive but actually thrive during these difficult times, we feel we are perfectly set up to capitalise on the opportuni-



## Consistency key for Cutris

**PRODUCING** good fruit consistently is a science, not an art, according to Swan Hill district stonefruit grower Gaethan Cutri.

"The business is process-driven," said Mr Cutri (pictured).

He uses the task of pruning – a skill passed on from his father – as an example.

"We have step-by-step diagrams of the pruning technique for each variety to remove subjectivity and ensure consistency.

"The challenge is in doing the same thing every time; it's not as skilful as you may think.

"We are aiming to become the McDonald's of the fruit tree world – to consistently produce a high-quality product on time, every time."

Cutri Fruits aims to reduce its number

of varieties from 56 to 40 in the coming years.

Varieties are carefully selected (a sapling costs nearly \$20 to buy and plant) and Mr Cutri is working towards having 5000 to 10,000 trees of each variety in production at any one time.

A fully automated irrigation system using radiowave technology to transmit data from field and plant sensors to a central software system is used across the whole farm – something Cutri Fruit has spent a lot of time working on.

By continually assessing the soil moisture, the irrigation system ensures the trees are able to grow at their optimal levels.

"We have made the ideal irrigation system useable, reliable and accurate – 90 per cent of plantings now have a soil moisture probe," he said.

ties which will avail themselves in the future."

And, for the Cutris, there are other advantages to working for themselves in a country region.

"I get to work with Nicole every day. When we were both in the big city working our corporate jobs there

was little time to spend with one another.

"Plus, when the time is right, I think being on the land would be a great place to raise a family.

"I've learnt skills I never would have were I to have continued working for someone else for the rest of my life.

"And these skills are things I will be able to take with me wherever we find ourselves in years to come."

*We're aiming to become the McDonald's of the fruit tree world – to consistently produce a high-quality product on time, every time.*

– GAETHAN CUTRI, CUTRI FRUIT

direction of our own business," Mr Cutri said.

After studying law and commerce, Mr Cutri practised as a litigation lawyer for five years in Melbourne at a top-tier firm before returning home to apply his experience in the corporate world to running one of the nation's biggest family-owned and operated stonefruit businesses.

Established by his parents Dom and Connie, the Cutri Fruit orchard comprises 170 hectares of peaches, plums, nectarines and apricots and has the capacity to plant a further 90ha.

Their world-class packing shed is able to pack more than two 40-foot shipping

mapping the entire operation," he said.

"We quickly identified every step required to run the business.

"From there it all became pretty clear – the areas for improvement and our opportunities to simplify and implement systems and key performance indicators."

They conducted a detailed analysis down to dollars per fruit type, week, customer and variety, highlighting opportunities for the business as they went.

"Our goal is to work more on the business than in the business," Mr Cutri said.

The Cutris have introduced a new accounting system, safety guidelines,

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**Gaethan Cutri, Cutri Fruit, Woorien**

- 170 hectares of peaches, plums, nectarines and apricots
- Packing shed with capacity to pack more than



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