

# Fresh As way to grow a company

Rob Stock 05:00, May 28 2017

Entering the Auckland offices over the fast-growing Fresh As freeze-drying company there's a wide, empty space, bare of furniture.

It's the quarter acre of space where an army of sales people were going to be.

But Fresh As founder Tommy Roff found he didn't need them, so none got hired.



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'The Caker', Jordan Rondel, believes the freeze dried berries are integral to her cakes.

It turned out his startling crunchy and intensely-flavoured freeze-dried ingredients virtually sold themselves to chefs all over the world, creating growth so rapid, he can barely keep up.

It seems there's almost nothing Roff can't freeze-dry.

He does fruits like raspberries and grapes, powdered blood orange, and herbs, but his warehouse shelves show a variety of things you wouldn't credit could be freeze-dried, or that anybody would want freeze-dried, like licorice, manuka honey, pineapple chunks, even sherry and balsamic vinegar.

Chefs prize the ingredients for their intense flavours, but also for their texture, which they use to startle and surprise diners.

A first taste of freeze-dried licorice, which is bemusingly light and crisp, is an unusual culinary experience.

Growth from his chef followers has brought another cost-saving, growth-enhancing benefit to Fresh As. It hasn't had to pay anyone to create the recipes it's using to promote its products to the retail public.

Chefs like "The Caker" Jordan Rondel are among the chefs on Roff's fan list.

"Tommy can freeze dry anything- wine, or vinegar or flowers. He's incredible," Rondel says.

When she wants something new, Rondel just calls Roff up, and he finds a way to do it.

"They just lend the most beautiful colour, flavour and texture. They taste like the essence of that fruit."

Other chefs who have championed his ingredients are Ray McVinnie, Michael Meredith and Kate Fay.

Roff's ambitions for retail success haven't yet gone as planned.



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Tommy Roff with "Willow" and "Susan", two of four giant freeze-drying machines at Fresh As' Henderson factory.

Initially, he thought retail was where the money was, and that the killer application of freeze-drying for the retail market was high-end snacks, like packets of dried mandarin segments, or halved red grapes.

But the snacks were just too expensive to win big sales, so he's changed his tack, and is making a fresh assault based around the thing that won him the support of chefs like Rondel, which is selling his wares as ingredients.

"As snacks, our products are expensive. As ingredients, they are good value," Roff says, imagining families splashing out on them to impress guests at dinner parties.

Rondel illustrates the point, using Fresh As ingredients to add texture, flavour and look to her cakes.

It's not only salesmen, and recipe-writers which Fresh As hasn't had to pay for.

The company hasn't got any food technicians either.

New ingredient lines, no matter how innovative, are made through experimentation by Roff and his staff.

Despite having no salesmen, no in-house recipe writers and no food technicians, growth has been rapid, so much so that Fresh As has nearly outgrown its high-tech Henderson factory, but hopes to be able to expand in place when the lease comes available of an adjoining building.

Globally, freeze-drying is big business, but Roff says he hasn't even tried to compete with giant US and Chinese freeze-drying companies on scale.

He's competing on quality, and trading on New Zealand's reputation as being a source of great ingredients.

Industrial-scale freeze-drying is a capital-intensive business, which has made for hairy moments for Roff.

Each of Fresh As' giant freeze-drying machines, which are lovingly given women's names by South Island maker Cuddon Engineering, cost over a million dollars, and look like beached submarines.

That's because the process of freeze-drying requires very low pressure, so submarine-grade strength is needed so the units don't implode.

The process involves freezing products first, and then sticking them in the freeze-drying units. A vacuum is produced in the machine, and the ice crystals in the frozen food vaporise and are removed.

What is left behind is a light, powder-dry version of the fruit, vege, herb, or other product.