

# MACADAMIAS: IN A NUTSHELL

Move over peanuts, cashews, and almonds: This tasty and nutritious native Australian nut is causing a big stir worldwide.

Words by **Katrina Sichlau**

**O**n the surface, Byron Bay is everything it's purported to be: a laid-back beachside town popular with hippies, surfers, yoga enthusiasts, and festivalgoers. But delve a little deeper by travelling a few minutes out of town, and you'll discover something else. The bay's surrounding Northern Rivers area is Australia's largest macadamia-farming region, producing 60 per cent of the domestic crop. As one of Australia's largest horticultural exports (it's valued at more than \$120 million per year), this little nut means big business for the passionate community of the local macadamia industry – and these people are clearly nuts for this native Australian nut.

## A GOOD NUT

Some 500 macadamia growers are based in the Northern Rivers region alone, and among them are Rex Harris and his sons, Daniel and Carl. Harris bought the 200-plus-acre Bangalow property in 1998 and a year later started planting his macadamia orchard. "I've always been a fan of nuts, and I thought the macadamia was the top of the tree as far as nuts go," Harris says. "We loved the area, and [the macadamia] is native to this area, so it just seemed a perfect match."

Although the planting and growing stage requires patience (macadamia trees can take from five to 15 years to reach maturity), the reward is well worth it, with each tree capable of producing as much as 15 kilograms of nuts per year.

Macadamia farms can range in size from 1000 trees to more than 300,000. The

Harris property boasts some 17,000 trees and 12 varieties of macadamia. It also features a sizable rainforest that not only increases the biodiversity on the property but also provides an efficient way to use areas that can't be farmed.

"If you don't do something with those [unfarmed] areas, you get a lot of weeds growing and grass, and that becomes a great habitat for rats," Harris explains. "The rats don't seem to like the rainforest area because it's too clean on the floor and there's not enough long grass and habitat that they like. It provides a beautiful addition to the property as well. We've got about 140 species of trees and scrubs [in the rainforest]." To further discourage unwanted pests, the property also has a collection of nesting devices, such as owl boxes, eagle nests, and beehives scattered throughout.

To keep the property as green and ecofriendly as possible, the Harrises are implementing methods such as carbon sequestering into their farming processes.

"We hope we'll be able to use some of our nut waste and convert it to biochar [a form of charcoal used to enhance soil productivity] and sequester it as carbon," Harris says. This involves converting the hard macadamia-nut shells to biochar by breaking it down without oxygen.

According to Harris, this process reduces the waste to about 45 per cent of its original weight while converting it into carbon. "By converting the shell to carbon and putting it in the soil, it will provide a habitat for fungi and soil bugs, and retain moisture and nutrients," he says. In other words, it's a great way to turn orchard waste into fertiliser.

## HARVEST SEASON

Macadamia trees begin to flower in early spring, and in summer, the macadamia nuts start to form. By the time autumn rolls around, you can see clusters of green nuts hanging from the trees like Christmas decorations. These mature and fall to the ground anytime from March to September, signalling harvest season.

Throughout these months, farmers regularly collect the nuts using a harvester – a tractorlike vehicle with a roller covered in prongs attached to the front that picks up the macadamia nuts from the ground. Harvesting can be a difficult, time-consuming process, because it's very weather-dependent.

"If it's too wet, we can't harvest," Harris says. "But if the weather's fine, we'll harvest about five times during the season. It takes us a good two weeks to go right through the property." Once one round is complete, it's time to start again. And it's no small task considering that Harris predicts they'll reap 200-plus tonnes of nuts this season.

At harvest time, the moisture content of the nut is about 30 per cent, so it needs to be dried before the kernel (the edible part of the nut) can be removed from its shell. The growers themselves reduce the moisture to 10 per cent and remove the husks before taking them to a processing plant, such as the Macadamia Processing Company (MPC) in Alphadale, NSW. At the plant, the nuts go into silos for additional drying – until they reach a moisture level of just 1.5 per cent.

Once dried sufficiently, the macadamias are then cracked using a



PHOTOGRAPHY: SARAH JANE HALL FROM AUSTRALIAN MACADAMIA SOCIETY.

**MACADEMICS** *Clockwise from top left:* When these nut clusters fall to the ground (from March to September), it's harvest time; brothers Daniel and Carl Harris survey their farm; the fruits of the trees' labours; cleaning and maintaining the orchard is part of the deal; no nut is safe from the harvester.

specially designed machine, and the nuts are sorted. At this point, discoloured, immature, damaged, or poor-quality nuts are rejected. They are then sorted again, this time according to size, and roasted, before being packaged and distributed.

Steven Lee, operations manager at MPC, says that macadamia nuts are best when you keep them refrigerated, which explains why the processing plant remains consistently cool. "The temperature

control is for the nuts, not the people," Lee jokes, "but don't tell our staff that!" The macadamia nuts are then sold worldwide and used in a range of products, from health and snack foods to confectionery and ice-cream.

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## Why Eat Macadamias?

Aside from their unique buttery taste, macadamia nuts – like most nuts – are full of nutritional value. The monounsaturated oil in macadamias helps maintain good cholesterol levels, and the fibre content aids in digestion. Macadamias can also help lower blood-sugar levels, which makes them an ideal snack food – particularly for those who suffer from insulin resistance.

Nutritionist Nicole Senior believes we should be including more of these nutritious nuts in our diets rather than snack on other foods. "Macadamias are a nutritious wholefood and just the kind of food we should be eating more of," she says. "They contain a healthy bundle of nutrients, including heart-friendly monounsaturated fats, fibre, protein, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants."

"Our diets contain too many 'extra' foods like biscuits, cakes, and salty snacks, and unwise snacking is partly to blame. Macadamia nuts are smart snacks because they add valuable nutrients and are also delicious and satisfying," she continues. And there are proven health benefits from eating one to two handfuls of nuts (30-60g) per day.

You can also try cooking with macadamia oil, slathering your toast with macadamia butter, or even getting a sweet fix with chocolate-coated macadamias! "They really are an indulgence you can feel good about because they are really good for you," Senior says.