

Eden, New South Wales

## MANTON'S BLACK PEARL OYSTERS

In 1981, Brothers Terry and Phillip Manton pooled their years of knowledge and experience within the oyster farming industry to begin their own operation. The knowledge they drew upon was from years working for non-Indigenous farmers, but more importantly, from the knowledge gained from their people. The brothers grew up by the sea - their skills have been informed through the sharing of knowledge that goes back thousands of years as Worami people. Their oysters are grown on eight leases at two sites, including the pristine waters of Wonboyn Lakes. The business is still family owned and operated with Terry's son Brett now playing a key role in leading the business into the future.

### The Story So Far . . .

Terry Manton explains the motivation behind the move into business - *'We were sick and tired of using our knowledge to help non-Indigenous farmers get rich. We knew we had the drive, the knowledge and the skills to become successful.'* However, while brothers Terry and Phillip had the knowledge, determination and motivation to start their own enterprise, the path was not easy. When an opportunity to buy a lease in Wonboyn Lakes, they risked their own savings to begin the business, taking the risk and launching *Manton's Black Pearl Oysters*.

Aquaculture is a difficult industry - the elements are continuously creating unforeseen challenges that cannot be controlled. Getting through these times has required faith, determination and the ability to keep moving and rebuilding after hard times. When the business was still in its infancy in 1986, an unusually high tide caused 95% of the stock to be lost. Prime stock was lost, stock that had taken three years to grow. The brothers had no savings or collateral to fall back on - all they had was their skill and determination.

## BUILDING THE FUTURE THROUGH ENTERPRISE Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

Brett recalls how his father and uncle *'... had to go back to working for local farmers, they began working for money and stock. Slowly but surely they rebuilt their own farm.'*

This setback was not an isolated incident and it is a risk that the next generation of Mantons – led by Brett Manton – is continuing to face. In the last six years *Manton's Black Pearl Oysters* has lost virtually all of its stock twice. The business is currently rebuilding after losing 98% of its prime stock to an algal bloom that occurred in another area of the river.

While the family has no control over nature, they have taken control of the business and the marketing direction of their produce. In 1992, Brett Manton began researching the market to find ways to increase profits. He was looking for a niche market. He coined the name *Manton's Black Pearl Oysters* due to the



*Oyster Beds*

brilliant black colour of the rim on the inside of the oyster shell. *'The brand name suggests a very special product, produced by special people'*, according to Brett. The family believed that their oysters were among the best in Australia - and thus deserved to be earning top dollar. Brett began cold calling the top restaurants in Melbourne, offering them the chance to taste the produce. Brett knew selling the oysters would not be a problem – the oysters would sell themselves – getting restaurateurs agree to meet with him would be!

The response he received from some of the most influential Melbourne chefs and business managers surprised him. Brett found these people were not only willing to drop their current suppliers, but they were also willing to pay a higher price for the oysters. There were two key reasons the restaurants were willing to do this. Firstly the quality of the product - Terry Manton believes the oysters from the Wonboyn Lake are *'... the best and tastiest oysters that my family and I have ever seen or eaten. The pristine environment and harsh cold conditions have a lot to do with the unique flavour of the oysters grown here.'* Secondly Brett found people that had a desire *'... to be associated with a unique business and were keen to help Indigenous people succeed.'* Brett's marketing initiative

has helped the business to establish *Manton's Black Pearl Oysters* in the market they deserve – the high end market.

Such a bold move to get the product noticed took determination and persistence it was not an easy process. Brett had to overcome stereotyping from the community that has labelled Aboriginal people as unreliable. Brett knew this bias existed, but he knew *Manton's Black Pearl Oysters* could continually and reliably deliver a quality product. The response from the top restaurants validated what the family already knew - *'They didn't have oysters, they had gold.'*

## The Impact

*Manton's Black Pearl Oysters* has had a significant impact on the aquaculture industry, the restaurant market and the perception of Indigenous people in business. The business continues to grow -the high



*Rick Manton*

profile of the oysters and their target market has elevated the Manton family to the top of their industry. Brett states that the aim of the family business is *'...to produce with profitability, manage with direction, and market with vision the Manton Black Pearl Oyster as Australia's premium gourmet oyster'*. (Department of State and Regional Development, 2005, p12)

The business is continuing a culture and the traditional knowledge that has been handed down through the family and their people for thousands of years. They are retaining their link with their land and their knowledge. Terry believes that Indigenous people *'... weren't given the recognition we rightly deserved for our valuable contributions to the industry and we aimed to change that, and have!'*

The Manton's are immensely proud of being strong Indigenous people in business. Brett



believes *'Aboriginal dignity (not identity) is determined by their level of competence in the commercial world.'* A highlight vindicating the

success of the business and their product was when the family was asked to hold oyster parties at some of the top corporate functions celebrating the first Melbourne Grand Prix in 1996. It became an ideal opportunity to raise the profile of the oysters among the target market. However, the Mantons used the opportunity for a much greater goal. The Manton family were able to show the non-Indigenous corporate community just how *'highly skilled and committed'* Aboriginal people were. Brett recalls, *'It was the first time most of these people had even spoken to an Indigenous person. I believe we helped them to see beyond the stereotypes.'*

The passion and commitment of the Manton's to raise the profile of Indigenous people within the oyster industry and business community remains a key priority. As Brett says, *'An Indigenous product grown for Australia by Indigenous people has a nice ring to it, hasn't it?'*

## Success Factors

The Manton family attribute their years of business success and high-grade product to five key factors.

### *Family Owned Business Arrangement*

The Mantons believe strongly in the value of the family unit as a basis for business for Indigenous people. Brett is critical of trends towards CDEP and community orientated enterprises, explaining - *'Aboriginal people are not community orientated, they are family orientated. The community approach to setting up and supporting Indigenous businesses and enterprises is not working - it is dysfunctional. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on supporting family businesses. These are the one's that succeed. When it comes to the crunch, Aboriginal people don't trust anyone outside of their own family, but then who really does?'* It is a goal of the business to have at least six local Indigenous family members full time in the business.

#### **SUCCESS FACTORS**

- Family Owned Business Arrangement
- Skill and Knowledge
- Combination of Commercial Activity with Cultural Knowledge
- Determination
- Christian Values



*Manton Family*

## Building The Future Through Enterprise – Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

Members of the Manton family are willing to go that extra mile. Brett explains their experiences - *'There are times when family members have had to work for nothing to rebuild the business - families do that. We all want to see this business prosper and have a legacy for our children. Kinship loyalty is not only a powerful ingredient and a great strength, but also a critical factor in respect to more successful participation of Indigenous people in the workforce. Kinship loyalties to 'family' and 'clan' must be the most untapped potential for Aboriginal development and motivation.'*

### ***Skill and Knowledge***

The Manton family built upon many years of experience within the oyster industry. Their knowledge and skills emanate from their own experiences and from the experiences of generations of their own kin before them.

### ***Combination of Commercial Activity with Cultural Knowledge***

Combining commercial activity with cultural knowledge has given the family immediate gratification and market advantage.

They are working in an industry they are strongly connected with culturally. It is the culture of their people – the Manton's are maintaining an association with the sea and with oysters that has spanned thousands of years.

### ***Determination***

Determination and stickability has helped pull the family through the many challenges the business has faced. This determination has held the business together and allowed it to rebuild time and time again. It is something that has enabled the business to gain profile within the market.



*Black Pearl Oysters*

### *Christian Values*

The family's Christian faith has motivated strong commitment and values. The family has adhered to a strict no alcohol policy, which they believe has certainly contributed to the strength of their family and their business.

## Advice to other Indigenous people contemplating the enterprise option

Brett gives the following words of advice – *'Base your business around your family, and choose a business activity you know a lot about. Commercial activity has to suit your culture. Draw on what your cultural knowledge has given you.'*

## For Further Information

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