

Tuesday September 06, 2011 2:04PM NZST

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## So good you could bottle it

Tuesday, September 6, 2011 9:21

You could easily picture a shaven-headed Neil McGarva feeding a bald baby in front of Prime Minister John Key, as he proudly displayed the world's first UHT baby's bottle with a sterile teat, at the official opening of his new joint-venture bottling plant in Whakatu last week.

McGarva has been out of Hawke's Bay for 20 years but has brought back a wealth of expertise.

He said being a food safety auditor in Auckland for 12 years gave him an appreciation of how to do things right.

"I developed a passion for food and beverage manufacturing and decided to start a bread manufacturing operation in 1992 with my sister Kaye Tollenaar and her husband Richard," he said.

"The mood in New Zealand in the way we were dining was changing from lunch bar to cafe style. When you do that you have to incorporate European style sandwiches and breads," he said.

Pandoro introduced Ciabatta and Panini breads to the Kiwi palate and business boomed, they had 150 employees when they sold up in 2002.

It enabled him to go it alone and start the Natural Pet Treat Co.

"We were doing pet food and a major distributor in Japan said, 'We want pet milk - can you do it?' We thought sure. We spoke to Fonterra and they said, 'No - it's not core business.'"

So he decided to do it himself.

"The nature of the plant is simply a case of taking a sterile bottle, filling it with a sterile liquid product inside a sterilised pressurised chamber and sealing it with a sterile closure. Providing everything is sterile the product is shelf stable and it doesn't require any type of preservative or refrigerated storage."

In 2005, he decided to combined his business and personal life - Bay family and friends were beckoning.

"I thought I would come here and set up a dedicated pet milk operation."

In 2006 a production line was completed and an aseptic filling machine was purchased with the help of local investors.

"But as I explored that market it became clear that the opportunities for UHT aseptic milk were much, much broader.

"In 2008 I met with Richard Rowntree, the managing director of Horleys, to discuss manufacturing protein drinks for them.



DEAL MAKER: Neil McGarva has assembled knowledge, technology and market reach ready for a world-first Bay bonanza. PHOTO/WARREN BUCKLAND HBT113578-01

"At that stage Richard suggested that the parent company of Horleys, Etika International in Malaysia, may be interested in a joint venture."

After a successful meeting a joint venture agreement was completed in 2009 and Etika Dairies was formed, with local investors Neil Pulford, Claire Vogtherr, John Thompson and Doug Leyser coming on board.

Work immediately commenced on the new factory at Whakatu. Late in 2010 the production line was installed and Etika remained steadfast during commissioning problems, he said.

Thanks to Etika's market reach most of the initial capacity has been pre sold.

Contract production is due to start in October.

The company says it will lift production from 6000 bottles an hour this year to 30,000 next year.

But still the innovation continues.

"A milk for barristas is under development that can be frothed multiple times - 80 per cent of a cappuccino is milk."

He said he was not worried about China copying the technology he had assembled. "They will still have to put Made in China on the bottle."

He said the journey so far had been a roller coaster, but Etika International were good partners and the choice of Whakatu was appropriate.

The McGarvas have been in Whakatu for nearly 100 years, he explained at the opening.

"My great grandfather and my grandfather came out from Glasgow in 1920.

"He heard there were jobs going at the Whakatu freezing works. The day he turned up board members were over from the UK and were having drinks.

"The Maori chap on security couldn't understand a word they were saying so he just said, 'look you're trying to come to this event'.

"So they walked into the board room celebrations and somebody put a glass of champagne into each of their hands and welcomed them in. My great grandfather nudged my grandfather and said, 'This is where we are going to work son'. McGarvas have been in Whakatu ever since."

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