



Exports are food for thought

A start-up Queensland chocolate maker has not let the local snake population stifle his export plans, writes **Mark Fenton-Jones**.

Small business operators face many hurdles when starting up their own business. Jason O'Connor faced snakes.

"I feel safer — and more productive — in the office overlooking where the snakes play than actually being in the fields double-checking that every piece of bark I walk over isn't about to move," he says.

After leaving Melbourne last October, where he had run an events planning business as well as working in business development for global fashion and jewellery companies for 15 years, 36-year-old O'Connor returned to the family farm, Lazy Acres, at Murphy's Creek. That's a five-minute drive from the historic Spring Bluff railway station on Murphy's Creek Road, near Toowoomba.

The farm has been run by the family for 20 years, and since 1997, they've grown chillis organically on the creek flat. O'Connor looks after the business's marketing, and uses chillis as the defining ingredient for the chocolate-making business that he founded with his mother, Lynne Seaton Anderson, a master chocolatier.

After graduating, Anderson studied the chocolate industry

in Europe with the intention of opening the Seatonfire Chilli Chocolate Factory and retail outlet in a train carriage on her property. But since the business started last April, it has added a commercial kitchen to produce the Seatonfire range. This consists of two flavours — mild or wild — made from their own specially grown red devil chilli, which isn't found anywhere else in Australia, and is blended with Belgium chocolate using their own recipe.

O'Connor has followed a clearly defined path to get his products ready for export. "Exporting was top of mind," he says. He invested in market research, investigated various

export assistance schemes, designed packaging with foreign markets in mind, and undertook about 10 Austrade courses for new export businesses.

Last year, the mother and son team visited Belgium and France where they found that while chocolatiers had dabbled in chilli products, their products were nothing like their own chilli chocolate. This is because their chillis do not turn bitter when cooked.

This year, O'Connor is planning a pre-Christmas trip to Korea, Britain, the United States, and Japan to meet contacts in prestige and boutique retail outlets in ski resorts. "The face to face interaction is imperative despite the influence of the internet," he says.

Nonetheless, he still

understands the benefits of modern technology for attracting customers. At the Fine Food Australia fair in Sydney this week, he will be displaying his products, along with other exporters, on Austrade's What's New from Australia virtual stand. Staffed by export advisers, they will provide feedback from the international buyers to the Australian companies that want a share of the \$15 billion

processed-food market. Last financial year, chocolate exports totalled \$171 million, up from \$166 million, figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show.

Austrade's chief economist, Tim Harcourt, describes Seatonfire as a "born global" business. "[It] means a business has created products or services that are natural export winners," he says.

"Those businesses succeed internationally without having to make it first locally, like

Seatonfire, which has decided to pursue exports rather than establishing success in Australia first. Around a quarter of new exporters are born globals. Global brands can be built from small local companies, especially in rural and regional Australia."

Brian Leckie is managing director of South Australian organic juice exporter Australian Food Innovators, which sells under the Fresh Attitude and BerrySweet brands. He also exhibits at the Fine Food Fair.

Leckie is confident that China and Japan will be the company's biggest markets within 12 to 18 months.

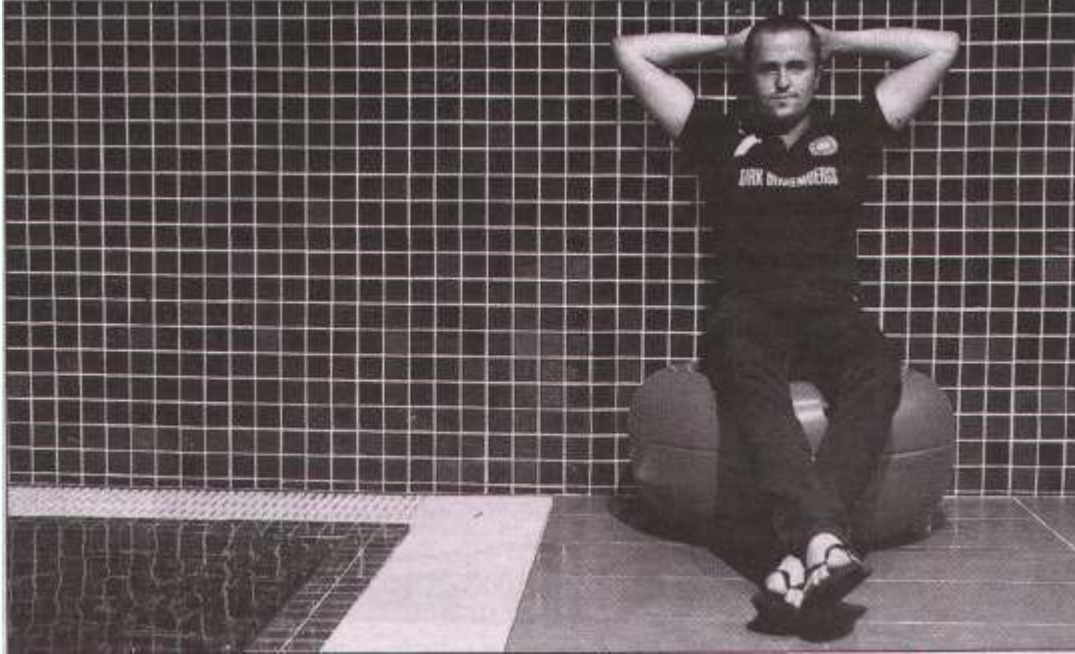
About a quarter of AFI's product is consumed in overseas markets, a figure Leckie expects to increase. He says a benefit of exporting is that it lessens dependence on local retailers. "The good thing about going overseas is you're not governed by two retailers and about three, four big beverage manufacturers," he says. "A company our size can't go into a Coles and negotiate the same deals as a big beverage company."

The rise of emerging economies is proving a major boost for exporters of Australian fine food and wine, and O'Connor advises exporters to be flexible about their export destinations.

"While you might have a clear idea of the various countries you want to fit into, keep an open mind for everywhere else," he says. "You have to be open-minded and flexible. Other countries, even at start-up stage, might snap you up faster and be more profitable for you."

O'Connor has just booked his three-week round trip for October, the start of the snake season. "I'll be glad to miss that," he says.

"Global brands can be built from small local companies."



Considers overseas markets a priority: chocolate maker Jason O'Connor on Sunday.

Photo: LOUIE DOUVIS