

wren's patch

Sarah Green



One of the Wren family's favourite ways to eat their own tomatoes is freshly sliced with purple onion and cucumbers along with a liberal dash of olive oil, red wine vinegar and a sprinkling of sea salt. Being the operators of five hectares of market garden just south of Margaret River, it's a dish they are able to indulge in regularly.

DAVID AND FAITH WREN are one of several commercial tomato growers left in the southwest of Western Australia and their story is as rich as the soil in which their vegetables thrive. One of three brothers who emigrated from California in the 1970s, David was in part prompted by a government initiative that encouraged Californians to move to Australia. Their father investigated the area and encouraged his three sons to move and work together in a market garden in the south west.

To add to this full history, the Wrens are Russian Molokan – adherents of a 'Spiritual Christian' tradition with its origins in Russia in the 1600s. For followers of food-based pejoratives, 'Molokan' is derived from 'milk-drinker' in Russian – the Molokans drank milk on what should have been Russian

Orthodox fasting days. In an act of positivity they embraced the term as their own. David and Faith's ancestors moved from Russia to Armenia in the 1830s and later to California and the Wrens joined a number of other Molokan families who had moved to Western Australia.

Being on the land is part of the heritage of Molokanism but David tells me he has always had a love of agriculture. Back in California, he studied irrigated horticulture, which gave him a solid basis for his current work. He agreed with his father that the south west was an ideal place for growing vegetables, with its high rainfall, rich soil and less extreme temperatures than California.

The Wren's busy season is from October through til mid-June, involving preparation and testing of soil, fertilising and planting.



David and Faith Wren

So when I speak to them they are in full production mode, preparing to turn over around 40,000 kilograms of tomatoes. Wren's Vegie Patch, as their business is known, sells a substantial amount of their produce locally in Margaret River and Augusta, with anything extra sent straight to Canning Vale, where it's distributed throughout Perth. The Wren's other significant crops are cauliflower and pumpkin but they also have small amounts of cucumbers, chillies, capsicums, lettuce, corn and other assorted vegetables – mainly to ensure they rarely need to visit the vegetable section of the supermarket.

David's wife Faith, also originally from California, usually runs the shed but this year their daughter, Joanna, has taken on the task. When I speak to David and Faith, their soft, laidback Californian accents have a slight Aussie twang. When Joanna picks up the phone, there is no audible trace of her American roots but as all three of their children have studied horticulture at TAFE, the (love) apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Faith says she loves the fact that the kids are involved in their business but there is no pressure for them to take it on one day.

"Dave loves what he does and that's why we do it," she says, adding that her husband had been instrumental in water reform for local producers of vegetables and dairy and ensuring that the South West's water was utilised for the sustainable development of agriculture.

It's clear that Faith also loves the lifestyle. "I hate it when I have to buy tomatoes – they taste so much better when they're fresh and home grown," said Faith. "We go through a lot of vegetables."

Whether a full plate of home grown vegetables is the key to their health or it's more an indication of their Russian heritage, David and his brothers are all well over six feet tall.

To end the interview, I tell David that I have a friend struggling to grow tomatoes in his backyard who has asked me to find out if there are any secrets he's willing to share with a fellow tomato enthusiast. He tells me the only secret is hard work—tomatoes require fertilising, pruning, watering and picking.

And what's the best test for a good tomato? David says it's the taste test.

"I eat tomatoes like apples—they are a fruit after all," he adds with a laugh.

SIMPLE TOMATO AND CUCUMBER SALAD

(GIVEN TO SPICE BY FAITH WREN)

tomatoes, sliced
cucumbers, sliced
red onion, thinly sliced
fresh basil
olive oil
red wine or balsamic vinegar

Place thinly sliced onions in the bottom of a flan dish or pie plate. Next put in the sliced cucumbers and sprinkle with salt, pepper and garlic powder or season with salt to taste. Tear basil into small bits and scatter a layer over cucumbers. Slice tomatoes and spread over cucumbers and basil. Add another layer of seasoning and basil to your taste. Drizzle some olive oil over the salad and top with a sprinkle of your favourite vinegar – Faith uses red wine vinegar or balsamic. Serve with crusty bread. 🌟