

## **Case Study - Coaldale Walnuts**

### **Food producers paving the way to a plastic-free future**

Located in the picturesque Coal River Valley, Coaldale Walnuts grow award winning walnuts for customers all over Australia. With a focus on sustainable farming practices, they've taken great leaps towards reducing single-use plastics.

Working closely with their supply chain, Coaldale Walnuts have switched some of their packaging to plastic-free options. At their annual open farm day, customers bring their own baskets and collect fresh walnuts to take home - completely single-use plastic free. They have even introduced a mug library at the event, offering freshly made coffee in bright and colourful reusable cups.

Coaldale Walnut's Director Sophie Milic shares how they went about making the shift to a single-use plastic-free future.

#### ***Who is Coaldale Walnuts?***

"We are a walnut farm in the Coal River Valley in southern Tasmania. We've been growing walnuts since my parents planted the orchard nearly 30 years ago. We started out selling more-or-less as a commodity, and over the years the brand has evolved and now we're selling retail and wholesale. We sell walnuts in the shell, walnut kernels and pickled walnuts."

#### ***What are some of the plastic-free initiatives you've put in place so far?***

"Our initiatives to reduce single-use plastic range from our agricultural operations through to our processes and to our packaging.

When we sell our product, we offer bulk options, particularly bulk kernels. These are in a cardboard box with a compostable liner, and we use compostable tape to seal the whole box; so the whole thing is essentially compostable. When people can buy in bulk, they are getting more product for the packaging, which helps to reduce waste."

We have an online shop where we use compostable mailers or recycled packaging. We have a little sticker that we put on the recycled packaging that says how we're doing our bit for the environment. I'm hoping that consumers understand – it can be tempting as a business to want everything to look nice, and new, and shiny, and professional; but there is a trade-off there. Part of it is about constantly educating consumers about why we do things this way, or why it looks different to what it used to, or why it's different to what other businesses are doing.

Then we have our annual open farm event which we've put a lot of work into making as waste free and plastic free as possible. We always have a coffee and food van and we work with them to make sure that all of their single-use food ware is cardboard or compostable. We make sure that the waste actually goes into the correct waste stream.

We also have a mug library at our open farm event. The aim was to educate the consumer a little bit and to encourage them to bring their own cup or use one of the reusable cups we had, and return it for us to wash.

Because it is a pick-your-own event, people bring their own buckets and baskets and collect their own nuts and so they are getting their walnuts packaging free. If they don't bring their own, then we offer them reused supermarket paper bags. So there's no plastic in that process at all.

It's just about having that mindset in business as to "is there a better option than this plastic thing?" Constantly asking "this isn't ideal from a sustainability perspective, what else can we do?"



Bulk walnut kernels packaged in a cardboard box with a compostable liner

***What made you decide to reduce single-use plastics?***

“I remember watching the ‘War on Waste’ and looking at the enormity of the problem. Recycling is not the answer, but when we could recycle soft plastics everyone felt good about it. When that option was removed, it really catalysed the need to actually avoid the plastic in the first place. Society has become too reliant on single-use plastic in situations where there are other options.”

***What was the first single-use plastic item you moved away from?***

“We haven’t been super systematic about it – we haven’t done a plastic audit and worked out what the priority areas are. It’s been more about us identifying the easy-wins as they’ve cropped up. Often with packaging, you buy an awful lot at once and it’s not until it runs out and you’re making that purchasing decision again that you make a change in business.

The first item was probably our compostable mailers for online orders, just because there were lots of options on the market and I was aware of them. Customers were quite aware of them and it wasn’t a difficult change because they don’t seem too dissimilar from the plastic mailers.”

***What are some of the challenges you’ve faced when moving away from single-use plastics?***

“Plastic is everywhere, in every process, so we’re very far from perfect. Sometimes we’ve tried compostable options that haven’t been as good as we’d hoped.

We tried compostable tape a few years ago on our pickled walnut boxes. Because we were placing hot jars in the boxes and then taping them up, the tape perished after a matter of months because it got too hot. But we’re not giving up, and we’re learning from those things. The options are getting better all the time, the technology is getting better, so you’ve got to keep trying.

We do have plastic 200g retail pouches. It’s been really hard to move away from some plastic because, for some uses, you start running into other issues like food wastage if the food isn’t properly sealed up. So we’ve made a conscious decision to stick with the retail pouches for now, but it is recycled plastic.

It can also be more expensive, and that's probably the biggest challenge. We are a small business, we don't have the capacity to absorb extra costs, so sometimes we really want to do the right thing and then we look at the difference in costs and it's just not something we can manage to do. There are other times when we realise it's going to be an increase in cost, but we're going to do it anyway because we think it's really important, and our customers agree."

***How did you overcome some of those challenges?***

"When we switched to compostable liners in our bulk kernel boxes, we went and talked to our biggest customer, who also had a strong sustainability ethos. We asked them questions about how they used the products, and how they stored it. We asked them, "are you willing to trial this with us?", and they were happy with that, to give it a go.

We talked to our packaging suppliers as well, because initially there were no box liners that weren't plastic, so we identified that compostable bin liners were probably the most practical solution. We asked our suppliers if their products were food safe and how they would go over time with walnuts in it. Having conversations and asking the question can be useful – we found that they were actually really excited because they also wanted to move into compostable liners for boxed products."

***What are some of the positive outcomes of switching away from single-use plastics?***

"When we have a stall at the markets, we sell bulk kernels to people who bring their own containers – I love that because we actually have the opportunity to eliminate packaging altogether. We very occasionally attend the Farm Gate Market in Hobart, and because people know they are coming to the market they can be organised and bring a container. I like having those opportunities.

Our open farm pick-your-own event is an all-round win. We get to the point late in the season where we can't economically harvest any more nuts from the orchard. The leaves are starting to fall, so our harvester continuously gets clogged up and there just aren't enough nuts to pick up. There is still nearly a tonne of walnuts though, so we have the event and people pick their own. It's just so efficient in many ways – people get their walnuts cheaper, they get to come and learn

about where their nuts come from, there's no packaging involved whatsoever, we save on fuel, so that's kind of an all-round low waste win."



Harvested walnuts placed in baskets at Coaldale Walnuts. Photo Credit: Coaldale Walnuts

***What would you say to other food producers looking to switch away from single-use plastics?***

"Don't be discouraged if it doesn't work the first time, try something else. I think single-use plastic is such a big issue that sometimes change seems too hard, or there are misconceptions around cost. Some things are expensive, but some things aren't.

Just change one thing at a time, and talk to other people about what they are doing."