

Taking carob from 'daggy' to trendy as life in retirement doesn't slow down

SA Country Hour By Brooke Neindorf

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Taking carob from daggy to trendy is the mission of a carob farm at Port Elliot on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula.

The chocolate substitute can often divide opinions with a taste that can screw up the nose of the biggest chocolate connoisseur.

But David Solomon, a GP from Adelaide, saw some potential and with his wife Carol and daughter, Sophie Richards they are bringing carob into fashion.

Now retired and living at the farm full time, Mr Solomon said his interest in carob beans stemmed from a family member.

"My brother in law Andrew Gebhardt was the main instigator growing carobs up in Burra and he started back in the 1970s.

"As far as I am aware he was the first person anywhere in the world to grow carobs in an agro-forestry style, horticulturally in lines and irrigated with the idea of one day having them machine harvested.

"From that point on I became terribly interested."

Mr Solomon was a general practitioner in Adelaide for 43 years and wanted a parallel interest, other than working in medicine, that could potentially be turned into some sort of income.

The Solomons purchased the property at Port Elliot in 1996, a spot that has ideal growing conditions.

"We have a very good supply of water," Mr Solomon said.

"Carob trees, which are principally grown in Spain, are legumes and are coastal, but they do enjoy quite a good low rainfall and we felt this was an ideal spot for it."

But the carob growing did not start straight away.

In fact the trees have only just been producing a meaningful harvest during the last three or four years.

"Each year the harvest is getting bigger and it is getting very exciting."



PHOTO: David Solomon and his daughter Sophie Richards in the carob pod shed (ABC Rural: Brooke Neindorf)

MAP: Port Elliot 5212

00:00

00:00

AUDIO: David Solomon and Sophie Richards talk about how they got into carob farming (ABC Rural)



PHOTO: David Solomon and Sophie Richards check on the carob trees to see if they are ready for harvest (Brooke Neindorf)

The harvest at the now organically-certified farm is anywhere from March to April depending on the variety and is done using a pistachio/olive harvester.

Mr Solomon said they use the machine because it cut back on time.

"We have about 3,500 trees and we tend to take two days depending on issues to harvest all those trees.

"If we were doing it by hand it would take us three months."

The beans are then dried and de-seeded from the husk, which is roasted, milled and turned into carob powder.

This powder is turned into the carob bars and carob bears and sold through their brand and website, The Carob Kitchen.

This is the next step in changing people's perceptions about the taste of carob.

The Solomon's daughter Sophie Richards, who has a background in wine marketing, was brought on board to sell the product.

The carob bars are made with cocoa butter, milk solids and vanilla with no added sugar, caffeine or gluten.

But the reputation of carob as an alternative to chocolate is not always great.

This is what Mrs Richards wanted to change.

"We came up with the Banjo Bear because packaging was really important, we wanted to take carob from the dagginess it might have been and bring it into today's terms.

"We have done a lot of taste testing days as well because unless you get it into people's mouths they will have that perception of 'yuck carob tastes disgusting'."

But Mrs Richards said the healthy alternative to chocolate has taken off, particularly with a lot more people looking for healthier options.

"We were lucky in that our trees were producing at exactly the right time when we were bringing our product to the market and launching in Australia and New Zealand because it was the big [anti] sugar thing that was going on.

"So that was fantastic for us and now the United Kingdom, which is where we plan to export to next, have just started the no added sugar, which has really helped."

Topics: rural, agricultural-crops, crop-harvesting, port-elliott-5212

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Sophie Richards