

An underground nightclub in the heart of Wellington city is an unlikely place for a thriving food producer to get its start, but this unconventional origin is quite a fitting story for a company like 26 Seasons. The New Zealand indoor vertical farming company that first sprouted in the nightclub is the first indoor vertically farmed commercial grower in Aotearoa – and one of only a handful in the world – to grow super-sweet strawberries in the off-season.

With global events and climate change disrupting supply chains and traditional ways of farming, indoor vertical farming is emerging as a resilient avenue

weather events, while controlling for light, water and nutrients, resulting in a consistent, high-yield crop. What makes this kind of farming particularly revolutionary is the fact that it has a lighter environmental footprint compared with traditional methods. Water is recycled throughout the facility, using a fraction (around 95 per cent less) compared to outdoor farms. Incorporating natural methods alongside modern technology, bees are used to pollinate the flowers, and because there is no soil, there is no risk of nutrient leaching. 26 Seasons' strawberries remain on the vine until they are 100% ripened, and are sold at the peak of their freshness.

A BERRY GOOD IDEA

Sustainable, indoor vertical farms, like those produced by 26 Seasons, are revolutionising the industry and planting roots globally.

in the agricultural space, making it possible to grow everyday produce at commercial scale indoors and sustainably.

A homegrown leader in the vertical farming industry, 26 Seasons was founded in 2017 by Steven Carden and Matthew Keltie, two experienced ag-sector individuals who were looking for new, more sustainable ways to farm. Beginning in Wellington with microgreens, the company has since expanded to an indoor vertical farm in Auckland, and a new flagship strawberry farm and research and development centre in Foxton.

Its technologically advanced facility is a carefully controlled environment that mimics ideal growing conditions, meaning the growers have been able to cultivate juicy, super-sweet, spray-free strawberries that taste like they've just been picked from your garden.

Planted in vertically stacked beds under a high-tech lighting system, the indoor farm eliminates external factors such as seasons, disease and adverse

26 Seasons CEO Grant Leach says this kind of innovation in strawberry production makes it possible for New Zealanders to enjoy locally grown fresh fruit all year round, rather than relying on international imports during the traditional off-season.

"Whether it is climate change affecting crop yields, or world events disrupting global food supply chains, food supply resilience is increasingly important," he says. The adaptability of vertical farming – the farms, after all, can be set up anywhere – has attracted lots of attention around the world as a viable solution to food insecurity. The company is currently eyeing overseas markets, embarking on a capital raise so it can expand its local and global footprint, starting in South-East Asia, where there is a strong demand for premium strawberries year-round.

"We have a pilot programme planned in Singapore, and we are looking to establish a 100,000+ plant capacity indoor vertical farm in South-East Asia, a region where high humidity makes strawberries



tricky to grow outdoors," says Leach. "Our proprietary controlled-environment grow system can be established quickly which means we can pop up indoor vertical farms in or near cities around the world where land and locally produced food is scarce. For instance, our strawberry technology can go from empty warehouse to the first harvest of strawberries in just a few months."

Kiwis can already get a taste for 26 Seasons microgreens and strawberries, and the company is looking at other varieties. "We are

currently working with Plant and Food and Venture Fruit looking at other fruits and vegetables we can sustainably produce out of season with trials underway soon," says Leach.

26 Seasons Super Sweet Strawberries are available in select supermarkets and restaurants. For stockists, visit 26seasons.co.nz



26 Seasons