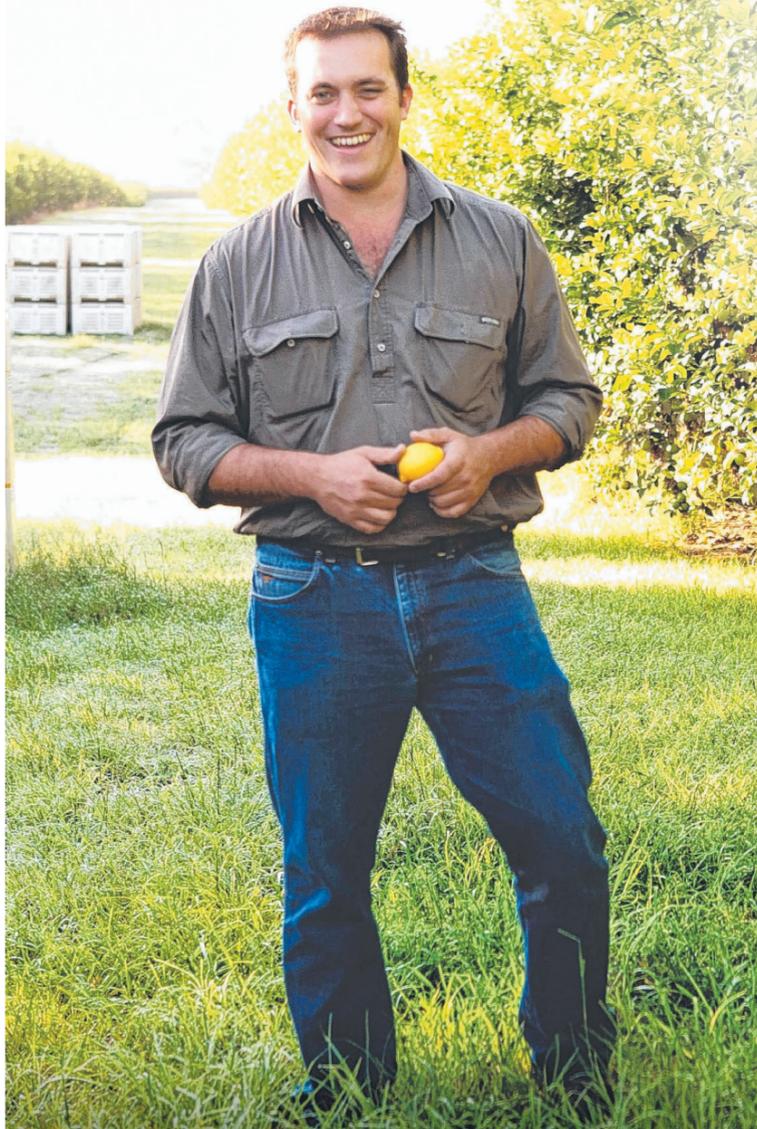


## ASK A FARMER

with Alice Gorman



# DAILY RIND HIS PICK



### MICHAEL McMAHON - Abbotsleigh Citrus

**Locale:** Wallaville, west of Bundaberg on the Burnett River

**Season:** Eureka lemons (December-June); Imperial, Hickson and Honey Murrcott mandarins (April-September)

**Staff:** About 20 full time; up to 200 during the season

**Sells:** In Australia and overseas at central markets and direct to chain stores

**Where citrus grows:** Mareeba, Emerald, Gayndah, Bundaberg and Mundubbera

WHEN Michael McMahon bought a citrus orchard at Wallaville in 2003, he knew nothing about growing lemons and mandarins.

Now he's one of Queensland's biggest citrus producers and grows and packs between 12,000 and 15,000 tonne of fruit a year.

Michael spent much of his childhood playing and working on his grandparent's cattle and cotton property at Dalby. When the family sold the farm, he and dad Terry looked for another farm. A friend suggested a citrus farm at Wallaville - the owners had gone broke and it was going cheap . . .

"It was a good property and the previous owners had spent a lot of money on it but hadn't been able to stick it out until it turned around," says Michael, 34.

"I was running a business for Dad in Brisbane. He rang me from the auction and said, 'Do you want to do it?' It was really up to me because Dad wasn't going to live there. In the back of our minds we were thinking we'd run it for a few years and try to sell it. Now we're in our ninth season and I don't think we're going anywhere."

Michael studied commerce at university and while it's been useful, nothing could prepare him for the challenges of running a busy horticulture business. He's had a crash course in everything from growing good citrus to negotiating the central market system.

He's had a lot of help from Rod and Petronella Campbell, initially brought in as advisers and now part-owners of the business.

"The first year we lost a fair bit of money," says Michael. "We had to spend a lot on pruning and fertiliser and chemicals. The place was looking really good and Dad was in Brisbane writing all these cheques thinking, 'This is a disaster, what have I done?'"

"The second year we broke even and the third year we turned the corner. Since then most years have been decent. One or two were really good. Last year was the first time since the start that we went backwards."

The floods of January 2011 came through his farm and badly affected fruit quality. Mandarins were very dry and lemon yields were down. And just when Michael thought things couldn't get worse, the market crashed due to large amounts of imported fruit.

"Everyone thought they could make a million dollars bringing in lemons because they thought Queensland lemons had been wiped out by the floods."

Check Alice Gorman's blog at [alicegorman.com.au](http://alicegorman.com.au)



## Q&A

**I'VE been trying to grow lemons in my garden. We're close to the coast and I've noticed my lemons always seem to have black spots. Why is this and how can I treat them?**

**Michael says:** If you're growing your lemons in a coastal climate you may need to apply a copper-based fungicide to control diseases such as black spot and lemon scab. These are best applied after pruning and during the growing period. Prune your tree once a year after you've picked the fruit. Give your tree fertiliser. This is particularly important leading up to flowering and during the growing period. An all-round slow-release fertiliser is good. Most other pests can be controlled with a White Oil spray.

**Email questions to** [alice@gormanmedia.com.au](mailto:alice@gormanmedia.com.au)

## SECRET TO SUCCESS

"If you want to survive, the quality has to be good and consistent. Also, you have to be as efficient as possible. The closer you can get to the customer the better."

## THE BIG ISSUE

"Increasing costs and stagnant or decreasing prices are our major challenges. The cost of electricity, fuel, chemicals, fertiliser and, most importantly, labour, have increased significantly over the past 20 years and our returns have remained stagnant. It's making it very challenging to achieve sustainable returns. These rising costs are outside our control. However, we are working hard to reduce chemical and fertiliser inputs by trialling new growing practices. We're investing in better equipment and automation to reduce labour costs. And we're focused on growing the best fruit we can so people return for more. We believe that increasing consumption will counteract rising costs."

## PADDOCK TO PLATE

**Harvest:** Lemons start slowly in December. Peak season runs February to June. Mandarins start in April and finish in September. Each lemon and mandarin is hand picked, washed, then waxed in the packing shed.

**Grading:** Fruit is graded into premium, Class 1 and juice grades and boxed into 15kg cartons.

**Transport:** Fruit makes its way to markets and supermarkets around Australia in refrigerated trucks.

**Post-harvest:** A tractor-operated hedger is run over the trees, then each tree is hand pruned. In winter, trees are fed and usually flower from July to September.

## PRICE

The retail price is usually 1½ times to double the farm-gate price. Our best lemons should be selling for \$3.99-\$4.99/kg.

## ONE INGREDIENT with Fiona Donnelly

Olivier Boudon, chef-owner at Sprout BYO French Cafe in Auchenflower, lists lamb among his favourite ingredients

THERE'S something special about lamb roasts for the food-loving French. We tend to communicate over food, so a lamb roast can be a very easy meal option.

Traditionally, the leg of lamb has been set aside for a Sunday weekend roast. However, with the new lamb roasts you can choose a rump or topside to easily prepare a

succulent lamb roast midweek and have dinner on the table in half an hour.

My favourite lamb is a Frenched-style leg, which is the whole leg with the sirloin section removed. It has a small amount of meat trimmed to expose an inch or more of the shank bone. Served with roast vegetables and crusty baguette.

If you ask your local butcher he can help with either the smaller mini lamb roast or the Frenched-style lamb leg.

It's easier in Australia to find good quality lamb at a good price.

**Go to [couriermail.com.au/LIFE](http://couriermail.com.au/LIFE) for Olivier Boudon's recipe for lamb roasted on a bed of potatoes**

