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## Tasmanians brandish a regional marketing edge

*No longer a victim of separation anxiety, Tasmania's detachment from mainland Australia is providing lucrative branding opportunities and giving the island state a competitive market advantage, says Nuffield Scholar Jane Bennett.*

By Melissa Branagh-McConachy

Bass Strait, once considered a treacherous barrier between Tasmania and the mainland, is now hailed as a quarantine moat that protects the state's agricultural industries from pests and diseases.

Northern Tasmanian cheese producer Jane Bennett says this status, together with Tasmania's temperate climate and fertile soil, enables the state to produce world-class food that serves as a tourism drawcard and offers rich opportunities for regional branding.

Ms Bennett, who is dedicated to building a values-based brand identity for new markets and improving farm gate profits for Tasmanian producers, was awarded a Nuffield Scholarship sponsored by Rabobank in 2007 so she could investigate the successful drivers of regional food branding overseas.

She has recently returned from her tour of farms, food manufacturers, retailers, cooperative marketing bodies and government agencies in Europe, North America and Asia, convinced that marketing products with meaningful provenance (product origin) attributes is an effective way to generate sales, but only after other purchase stimulants such as price, taste, health and convenience are satisfied.

"In Britain consumers are increasingly using provenance as an indicator of premium quality, so regionality can underpin product values provided the primary consumer needs are met," Ms Bennett says.

The Nuffield Scholar cites her most important lesson as the realisation that no-one supports regional business better than its community. "Marketing strategies need to focus locally before engaging external markets," she says. "However, low populations in rural Australia mean that regional marketing strategies must also target urban consumers, who are more likely to support regional provenance when production is consistent with environmental or animal welfare standards."

Tasmania's standing as one of the world's few 'clean and green' destinations is synonymous with these values – giving the state a marketing edge that has, until recently, been largely overlooked. Ms Bennett, appointed chair of the Food Industry Council of Tasmania in 2002, was instrumental in commissioning research that found 60 per cent of all food produced in the state's major agricultural sectors was sold as bulk commodity produce or under a national/international commodity brand without reference to its place of origin.

“The study also confirmed that more than 90 per cent of farm land committed to Tasmania’s dairy, vegetable and red meat sectors was owned by families, with the small scale of most operations inhibiting their capacity to access and supply export markets,” Ms Bennett says.

This challenge motivated her to develop water and plant infrastructure to increase milk production at her family’s Elizabeth Town dairy by 20 per cent, precipitating a major shift into the cheese export market and significant sales growth.

As managing director of Ashgrove Cheese, Ms Bennett has evolved the business into a market leader supplying retailers and food service outlets nationally, with smaller quantities sold to New Zealand, the United States and Asia.

“We have developed a solid brand identity within Australia, but consolidation of shipments with other local produce, particularly refrigerated freight, and developing the Tasmanian brand to establish an ‘on shelf’ presence are the most effective ways to create export opportunities and maximise value,” she says. “Branded Tasmanian produce is the key market opportunity for Tasmanian farmers and cooperative marketing can work well when all participants share a common vision and values.”

Ashgrove Cheese is already working with other producers to increase Tasmanian product bulk in major Australian supermarkets and Ms Bennett is confident this principle will work overseas with the support of the Brand Tasmania Council – an independent marketing body supported by the public and private sectors. Ms Bennett is a board member of the council, which last year registered a brand identity trademark applicable to products that meet its production, marketing and environmental integrity guidelines.

“People who have a positive association with Tasmania will buy Tasmanian branded products, which is why it’s important to enhance the quality and profile of Tasmanian produce, encourage broad local brand ownership, and link food and drink to tourism,” Ms Bennett says.

Based on insights into some of the world’s most successful regional brands, including Riverford Organics and Dorset Cereals in the United Kingdom, and Anne’s PEI Farm, which exports organic produce from Prince Edward Island, Canada, Ms Bennett says regions that have developed identities in national and international markets have common elements including: a geographically recognisable area; residents unified by a sense of identity; credible local and celebrity champions (Tasmania’s international brand champion is renowned chef Tetsuya Wakuda); a vibrant arts culture; and a strong food, agriculture and tourism focus.

Although these principles do not necessarily apply to mainland Australia, where geographic boundaries are ambiguous, Ms Bennett says regional branding works in Tasmania, King Island and Kangaroo Island. “Overseas, it is effective in Cornwall – an isolated region hanging off the end of England where every cafe I visited was loyal to Cornish produce,” she says. Similarly, although only a jagged line separates Wales and Scotland from England, language or accent and national pride segregate the Celtic states, and regional branding is also successful in Switzerland, which remains distinct from the European Union.

“Branding creates an advantage for areas that fit the criteria, but it remains an underpinning value – not a sole selling point,” Ms Bennett says.

“Tasmania has a high standing for premium quality seafood and cherries in Japan, but this does not apply in China so we brand Ashgrove Cheese as a Tasmanian product in the Tokyo market but promote it exclusively under its own brand in Shanghai.” The same philosophy prompted the Nuffield Scholar to brand the Ashgrove Cheese ‘Tasmanian Trio’ the ‘Tasty Trio’ in New Zealand, where consumers are reluctant to support the Tasmanian dairy industry.

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“Regional branding does not work unless consumers value a product’s place-of-origin, so governments have a responsibility to identify an overarching set of values, to ensure all government sectors incorporate those values in strategic planning, and to assist industry in generic marketing and promotion of the region and its produce,” she says. “In developing a regional brand identity, industry’s role is to marry local values with their business brand to enhance provenance integrity of their products, but regional branding is not a substitute for individual company marketing.”

The Nuffield experience has inspired new ways to link regional produce to tourism at Ashgrove Cheese. The retail shop now screens an interactive film that takes visitors behind the brand; new brochures explain how to best use the milk and cheese products; and an expanded cafe food range utilises Ashgrove ingredients. “Consumers who are provided with information on the provenance and uses of a product can become food influencers,” Ms Bennett says.

She is preparing reports for the Tasmanian and National Food Industry Councils based on her findings.

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A high-resolution photograph of Ms Bennett can be downloaded from the “media\_images” album, through the gallery link at the Nuffield Australia website, [www.nuffield.com.au](http://www.nuffield.com.au), or from [www.coretext.com.au/communications\\_images.php](http://www.coretext.com.au/communications_images.php). Please contact Catherine Norwood at Coretext Communications (03) 9670 1168, [cnorwood@coretext.com.au](mailto:cnorwood@coretext.com.au) if you have any problems accessing images.

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