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Scholar's quest targets premium seafood experience for diners

By Catherine Norwood

South Australian oyster producer Lester Marshall admits that even after 15 years producing oysters at his Coffin Bay Oyster Farm he is often at a loss to describe his oysters in a way that will identify and differentiate the regional and age-based characteristics that develop over the lifetime of an oyster.

This conundrum has seen Mr Marshall return from his international Nuffield Scholarship with a new quest: to develop descriptions for the many nuances in taste, texture and aroma offered by Australia's vast array of seafood. It's a move he believes has the potential to revolutionise seafood marketing and increase consumption as people seek new, more refined dining experiences.

During his 2008 Nuffield Scholarship, sponsored by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, Mr Marshall visited the United Kingdom, seeking out Cornwall-based celebrity chef Mitch Tonks who helped to develop a definitive guide to the taste, texture and aroma of almost 100 key seafood species commonly sold in Britain.

The guide, *Young's Lexicon of Fish*, is a world-first initiative from UK food company and fish specialist Young's and provides a vocabulary to describe fish. Mr Marshall is planning a similar publication for the Australian seafood industry, lining-up meetings with national food and wine industry experts to help with the project.

"The language in the *Young's* guide is like that the wine industry uses to describe its product, and to differentiate one product from another," he says. "I believe it has the potential to change the face of seafood in Australia. We often refer to seafood as a premium product, but I don't think that's the message we communicate when we talk about it."

Mr Marshall believes a similar Australian publication will be a powerful tool, providing information and education to all parts of the fish supply chain, from wholesalers through to the food and hospitality industry and home chefs, while promoting the consumption of fish. He hopes it will also help to promote regional brands and culinary tourism, which he says is a growing trend overseas, along with the 'slow food movement', all aimed at achieving the best possible food experience.

"The trend is really strong among people aged 40 to 60, who have grown children, or no children, and who want to eat fine food. They may not be travelling in large numbers, but they spend a lot on the best possible experience," he says. This is an important part of the market Mr Marshall is targeting with the development of premium brands for his Coffin Bay oysters, including Cupids, Valentines, Casanovas, King Oysters and, finally, 315s (named after his oyster lease number), which he says are the Grange Hermitage of the oyster world, matured for at least five years, and hand-selected for the ultimate eating experience.

Marketing and developing premium brands was the theme of Mr Marshall's Nuffield Scholarship travels, which virtually became an international gourmet's tour, encompassing China and Hong Kong; Johannesburg, Cape Town, and the Franschhoek Valley in South Africa; and Europe's fresh food hub – the Rungis Market in Normandy, France.

In Spain he visited Barcelona, but was disappointed he couldn't get a seat at restaurant El Bulli, reputed to be the best restaurant in the world. Despite its relatively isolated location in a coastal village 150kms north of Barcelona, the restaurant is booked until the end of 2009, and receives more than a million requests for only 8,000 seats available during the year. Mr Marshall says it shows how the pursuit of a quality experience can draw people to regions they might not otherwise visit.

In the United Kingdom Mr Marshall attended a "farm shop" conference in Newton. He says farm shops – where farmers sell their own regionally-branded produce direct to consumers, often joining with neighbours to increase the variety of products – are a growing trend in Britain. In Scotland he visited the Lock Fyne oyster producers, discovering that although oyster production in Australia was more advanced, marketing of the same produce in the UK was far superior.

"One of the best examples of premium branding I saw was KellyBronze Turkeys," Mr Marshall says. KellyBronze turkeys are slow-grown, free-range birds, sold to consumers boxed with cooking instructions and even a thermometer to help achieve the optimum eating experience. "Paul Kelly is the premium turkey producer in the UK, he sells 80 per cent of his product to a premium market and 20 per cent as a wholesale commodity. That's the kind of business model I'm hoping to develop."

He says innovation in marketing, such as including the thermometer with the packaged product, can help customers improve their eating experience. Mr Marshall has already identified the potential for a similar innovation in oyster marketing, after a shortage of workers to shuck oysters for metropolitan fish wholesalers restricted sales in last year's pre-Christmas period.

He believes selling oyster gloves and an oyster and clam knife where oysters are also sold could encourage more people to learn how to shuck oysters themselves. More oysters could be sold unopened, removing labour shortages as a barrier to sales. "A lot of people take pride in being able to open oysters and provide them absolutely fresh to their friends. It's another example of the growing focus on premium eating experiences," he says.

Mr Marshall will be one of 10 Nuffield Scholars presenting a report at the Nuffield Australia Autumn Tour, in Cairns from April 16 to 19. Other study topics include regional branding, the export beef marketing chain, cooperative marketing, product distribution chains, approaches to water policy, reducing farm inputs, biofuel opportunities and managing stock to improve rangeland environments.

The Nuffield Autumn Tour is open to anyone interested in attending. More information is available from the Nuffield Australia website, www.nuffield.com.au or contact Nuffield Australia chief executive officer Jim Geltch on (03) 5480 0755.

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A high-resolution photograph of Mr Marshall can be downloaded from the "media_images" album, through the gallery link at the Nuffield Australia website, www.nuffield.com.au, or from www.coretext.com.au/communications_images.php. Please contact Catherine Norwood at Coretext Communications (03) 9670 1168, cnorwood@coretext.com.au if you have any problems accessing images.

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