

# The Informer

Mercury Bay

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## Multiple medals for Opito Bay Salt Company at prestigious awards

By Tony Stickley

At its very first attempt, Opito Bay Salt Company (OBSC) won multiple medals at the prestigious Outstanding NZ Food Producer Awards last week. Their success is all the more remarkable because the company - which produces a range of solar-dried sea salts - is only in its first full year of production.

"We were absolutely astounded," said Perry Cornish, who set up the artisan salt producer with his partner, Erin Mone. "We didn't really hold out too much hope, we just thought it would be nice if we got something. It is just incredible."

In the end, OBSC ended up collecting five medals - two golds for their natural and rosemary sea salts, two silvers for their smoked chilli and black garlic offerings, and a bronze for their furikake seasoning.

Other food producers, even big established brands, have sometimes waited years before having any success at the awards and by The Informer's count, only one other entrant in OBSC's category won as many medals this year, despite it having been OBSC's first time entering the awards.

Perry said that the awards - under head judge, Lauraine Jacobs, past president of the New Zealand Guild of Food Writers - were important for small to medium-sized food producers to get their products into major retailers and in front of professional chefs. But even large, well-established brands enter too. "It is a recognition of quality given by some 30 of the country's top chefs, food writers, critics and retailers who judged products before them at blind tastings," he said.

As well as appraising the quality and flavour of the food presented, the judges also considered issues such as sustainability and packaging, a particularly important aspect for retailing.

Obviously, the judges could have had no problem with sustainability, considering OBSC's artisan salt is made from seawater sourced from the glittering Opito Bay and evaporated in purpose-built greenhouses nearby.

The judges, all experts in their field,



Perry Cornish and Erin Mone, the owners of Opito Bay Salt Company.

gave valuable feedback and advice for the awards entrants to take on board. But while sustainability and the packaging were undoubtedly important, they would not win a prize on their own in the absence of a winning flavour. And it was mainly the OBSC salt itself, with its distinctive taste, that won the judges' hearts. "We try to sample every artisan salt we can, particularly from offshore, and we are really struggling to find anything distinctive about them," said Perry.

By contrast, the OBSC products had an instant impact on the palate, briny yet minerally sweet. "People experiencing true artisan salt for the first time are blown away by the flavours and saltiness," said Perry. "Our salts are unique in terms of minerality, their distinctive flavour and texture, which is very different and appealing. And I guess that was what the judges liked about our salts and their blend of New Zealand ingredients, which is why they gave us the medals."

Last year, when The Informer wrote about OBSC for the first time, the company had only been in operation for four months or so and distributed to only a handful of outlets across the Coromandel. Now they have over 50 retailers in the North Island stocking their product, with more retailers phoning each week wanting to sell their sea salts, which has meant a big increase in production.

"It has been super-important to us that we don't let people down, so we have only been expanding at a rate at which we can supply the market," said Perry.

As demand has grown, so has the workload, with all aspects of running a small business having to be considered, such as sales, production, packaging, marketing and distribution.

Being salt farmers primarily, Perry and Erin love the connection to the sea, and the realities and uncertainties of production, but also the challenges of taking a product to the market directly. "Being waist deep in sea water in the middle of winter does have its moments," said Erin.

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# Medals for Opito Bay Salt Co

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Last winter, OBSC expanded their production facilities with new greenhouses and would be doing so again this winter. For future expansion, they were looking at a number of different options, including working collaboratively with other businesses, such as the "lovely collab" they have with Mercury Bay Estate Winery and Restaurant, and another in the pipeline with a chocolate maker.

In fact, Perry and Erin's collaboration enthusiasm has resulted in them sending off a consignment of salt to a Michelin-starred Kiwi chef running a restaurant in Galway which is said to be one of the top five in Ireland. However, it appears the package has gone missing in the post. "It is so infuriating... she is so keen also," said Perry.

Both Perry and Erin worked in corporate finance before starting their unique salt-making operation on the Coromandel. While they would never consider returning to their old careers, what they learned in the corporate world has nevertheless stood them in good stead.

"I think we are very lucky because, having been trained in business and a different way of thinking, we are about numbers and about having a plan as much as about lifestyle," said Perry. "It also helps coming from a very foodie background."

However, setting up a successful business from scratch required hard work, compromises and long hours as well. "We are probably not doing 'lifestyle' as we had envisaged, having hot summers by the beach, but I have to say we are loving it and enjoying it, just the same," said Perry. "And what makes it all worthwhile

is somebody saying, 'Hey, you are making a damn good product.' It is really satisfying that people like top chefs, food writers and critics like our salt and that is a great endorsement of what we are doing."

But while Perry and Erin sometimes have to put in 12-hour days, they make sure they can enjoy the easy-going Coromandel way of life as much as possible. "If suppliers, chefs, retailers or business contacts take the time to drive to Opito Bay and drop in to see us, we always like to take the time for a cup of tea or a glass of wine with them," said Perry.

As well as having OBSC's artisan salts validated by multiple medals from the Outstanding NZ Food Producer Awards judges, Perry and Erin have also been getting great feedback from people they meet at the markets they attend. "The markets are important to us," said Erin. "There's a small but growing group of artisan food producers on the Coromandel, they're a great bunch and really supportive."

When at the markets, Erin and Perry love nothing more than seeing people's reaction when they try the OBSC salts. "Salt is not just salt anymore," said Perry. "With consumers choosing to buy more quality produce, whether from the local butcher or vegetables from a market stall, we talk to them about how to enhance the flavour of that produce with our salts... we like to think about it as inspiring food journeys."

"To be fair, there is nothing more special than growing your own vegetables and having it with a knob of New Zealand butter and a pinch of Opito Bay salt."



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