

The world's their abalone

Words: Peter Morgan Photos: Randy Larcombe



Damon (left) and Dion Edmunds on one of their abalone boats at Streaky Bay.

The richness and diversity of the \$350 million Eyre Peninsula seafood industry is personified in the Edmunds brothers of Streaky Bay Marine Products.

Damon, 41, and Dion, 39, head a family business built on exporting luxurious wild-catch abalone, which presently fetch over \$100 a kilogram, to insatiable Asia.

King George whiting has been their entry for expansion to the Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide markets with other types of seafood.

Using MBL merchandise extensively, they process snapper, garfish, gummy shark, southern calamari, king prawns, blue swimmer crabs, mussels and oysters from around Eyre Peninsula, billed as Australia's Seafood Frontier.

The factory, on the Streaky Bay foreshore, has never been busier, and sales from the attached, newly renovated small shop have risen sharply in the past year.

And the best is seemingly yet to come for the Edmunds family, benefiting from Eyre's pristine environment which yields in-demand seafood without peer.

Some 70% of SA's overall seafood and 95% of SA's aquaculture output, led by Port Lincoln tuna, comes from Eyre, with most sold overseas or interstate.

Many stories have surfaced over the years of self-made men making their for-

ture in seafood but the Edmunds' family has stayed in the background.

The business had its origins in the 1960s through Damon and Dion's father Cliff who was a part-time abalone diver in SA's South-East.

An electrician at a papermill, Cliff dived for abalone with a permit from Port MacDonnell and Beachport.

"Better weather conditions for diving led to him moving to Streaky Bay in 1976," Damon says.

"Over the next 10 years, there was more money in abalone than being an electri-



Dion Edmunds with King George whiting.



cian so Dad took a gamble and entered the seafood business fulltime."

Streaky Bay Marine Products began in 1985. Cliff and wife Pam, in their first business, built a shed next to their foreshore home to process Cliff's abalone.

Unusually, the property's legal boundary extends 80 metres into the ocean.

With Asian demand for abalone continually rising, Cliff and Pam expanded the factory and hired more staff.

They are now retired but still take an active interest in the business, which holds three of SA's 35 abalone licences and employs divers.

Damon and Dion are trained abalone divers but spend more time in the office.

As General Manager, Damon looks after the overall business including staff management and sourcing assorted seafood, while Dion looks after exports.

Damon's wife, Sophia, and Dion's wife, Renae, came onboard last year to manage the retail side.

The women expanded the range of fresh seafood, and set about refurbishing the shop, putting up new signage, and designing new uniforms and a new logo.

In just 12 months, Sophia and Renae increased the shop's takings by 40%. Now they are working on a new website.

But the business core will always be greenlip and blacklip abalone.

The sea snail is a valued delicacy in many Asian countries, especially China and Japan where it embodies luxury – rare, exotic, delicious and expensive. It's also regarded as an aphrodisiac.

"We export 98% of the abalone we process. Most goes to Hong Kong, China, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia," Dion says.

"We send some to North America, to the big Chinatowns in New York, LA and Toronto. It's big at weddings and special celebrations.

"We've been hit hard by the value of the

strong Aussie dollar which has taken 30% off our bottom line.

"It's strange that we now get more for the abalone we send to Sydney than from export."

Nevertheless, it's lucrative. The Edmunds annually process 30-40 tonnes of abalone which fetches between \$3 million and \$4 million.

The amount they process is a mix of what their own divers collect and what they buy from several other licence holders.

It's a highly regulated, quota based industry in which a diver, attached to an air hose and working alone, can be well rewarded.

Abalone, of regulation size, are prized off rocks with a knife and brought up to the surface bag by bag.

But there are risks. The currents can be surging, the water icy and the swells fearsome.

And Great White sharks have taken abalone divers, including one near Coffin Bay last year, despite protective cages.

"Sharks are a problem. You can't stop them from being out there," Damon says.

"We are experienced and know what we are doing. We have a diving code and safety procedures."

Damon and Dion have five sons between them, aged 14 to three, so there's every chance there will third generation involvement in the business.

MBL's role

With innovation and MBL's packaging help, Streaky Bay Marine Products has targeted tourists, led by grey nomads, driving across the Nullarbor.

It vacuum packs 400g lots of King George whiting in trays that neatly fit into caravan and motorhome fridge freezers.

A tray of the filleted fish is ideal for a couple and there is no mess.

The retail side of the business, part of Eyre Peninsula's Seafood and Aquaculture Trail, is driven by tourism.

Streaky Bay, renowned for its fishing, is a holiday destination in its own right and is a popular overnight stop for Nullarbor travellers.

"The caravan park is full for 90 per cent of the year; it's quiet only in July and August," says Damon Edmunds.

"We sell foam boxes with gel for travel-



Production Supervisor John Giersh leads filleting. MBL supplies everything needed for seafood processing, from knives and protective clothing to trays and containers.



Street presence...the newly renovated shop, with new signage, attracts tourists.



The enticing shop is a credit to managers Renae (right) and Sophia Edmunds.

lers with no cold storage, and the vacuum packed trays of whiting have been good for us."

For the filleting process in the factory, everything from large plastic boxes to knives and protective clothing, including gloves, is supplied by MBL.

MBL supplied the vacuum machine a few years ago and continues to provide vacu-

um bags and moisture absorbent open cell trays.

"I'll be visiting the MBL showroom next time I'm in Adelaide to organise a new vacuum machine. We need to update to a bigger one," Damon says.

"We use all types of products from MBL. Apart from freight costs, our MBL account is our biggest outgoing."