

Chantal's organic success story. Pacific Aerosol knows cans. Jarden on businesses and carbon credits.

Bay Biz



Photo: Florence Charvin



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ORGANIC OPPORTUNITIES: THE CHANTAL STORY



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In 1979 teacher Maureen Ward Alexander and chartered accountant Peter Alexander returned from their Big OE to Hawke's Bay. Maureen was a farmer's daughter from a place on the Taihape Road. Peter hailed from a small town south of Auckland called Pukekawa made infamous just a few years earlier by the Crewe murders.

Both became vegetarian while living in Dunedin. Returning to Hawke's Bay the couple found it hard to buy the whole foods, such as lentils, that were easily obtained when they lived in London. Luckily there was a local vegetarian co-op called Chantal offering access to the foods they sought.

Over time, the co-op grew. Eventually there was enough momentum and business potential that Peter and Maureen, together with Carol and Alan Burke opened a small shop - also called Chantal - in Napier's Hastings Street. It was 1983.

Forty years later Chantal is still on Hastings Street, albeit a few metres away from the original store and with a much bigger footprint. In that time it has become a trusted focal point for the vegetarian and organic communities.

Every step in the Chantal story has been organic. Original partners Peter and Maureen and Carol and Alan did not start their enterprise with the goal of creating a multi-million dollar business. At its peak under Ward Alexander ownership Chantal grew, and grew, and grew to become a vertically integrated operation incorporating a store and café, organic gardens, and a wholesale business carrying around 1,000 stock lines and supplying other organic shops all around the country, with a total workforce of around 80.

It wasn't intentional per se, it just happened. A case of seeing opportunities and taking them.



“When we first started it was really hard to get any organic product, and we had no concept of what the potential opportunities were.”

Peter Alexander

Generations in the making - the Chantal Family. Peter and Maureen Ward Alexander, their daughters Mara and Tess, son-in-laws Ben and Tim, and grandkids Chloe, Elodie, Archie and Obi. Photo Florence Charvin

Maureen talks about how the Chantal range expanded into supplements in the early 80s. “A woman with a supplement shop in the mall was closing down. We weren’t going to have supplements, but she wanted to ensure ongoing supply for her customers and asked if we would take the products on.”

Going wholesale

The wholesale business had a similar low key beginning, founded on a surplus of carrots, explains Peter.

“One of our growers had more carrots than we could sell. So I rang up some of the Auckland shops and said, do you want some organic carrots? And they all said yes. So that was how we actually started.”

The wholesale organic range expanded into dry goods from an experience Peter had with a raisin supplier, after comparing prices and estimated margins.

“I considered he was making too much, so we started selling raisins and made a fair profit.”

Chantal Wholesale - supplying other organic stores - was run from the back of the shop, until it got too big, says Maureen.

“In 1999 we moved the wholesale business to North Street.”

Chantal has always been about community. At its heart it’s about nourishing families. It’s a business that holds true to its original principles and ethos, and is the life’s work of Peter and Maureen. Over the years their daughters, Tess and Marla, and many cousins have worked at Chantal. And today, as adults with their own young families

Tess and her partner Tim, and Marla and her husband Ben are all associated with the business. Tess and Tim run the Chantal store as part owners, and Marla and Ben operate Petit Jardin, a small market garden run on organic principles that supplies Chantal with seedlings and vegetables.

In truth, all of the developments in Chantal wholesale over the years have stemmed from the retail store. “The driving point was to wholesale anything that we could sell in our own shop. That was the test,” Peter says.

“And it kept mushrooming.” Soon Chantal was wholesaling products from all over the world.

“When we first started it was really hard to get any organic product, and we had no concept of what the potential opportunities were,” says Peter.

Peter and Maureen travelled widely and researched to find new products for Chantal. They kept an eye on trends, and sourced what people asked for - in the days before the internet.

Not a hippy shop

Maureen says that she and Peter took particular care when setting up the shop, designing the logo, and getting the shop fit out right, so that people would feel comfortable coming into the store.

“It couldn’t be seen as a hippy sort of shop,” she says. “So that’s why we got the designer to make it look more mainstream and accessible. And people did come.” That half sunflower logo is still the brand identity four decades later.

Reflecting on her time in the business, Maureen says the shop was different from the wholesale arm. “It was

always fun, somehow. I felt I was doing something for the community.”

Peter says that he enjoyed the establishment phase.

“In a lot of ways I enjoyed establishing the business and the early days, a lot more than the later days. I enjoy the creation, but running a creation - that’s not me.”

Maureen adds: “He likes new projects and starting things.”

Peter says that when you’re growing a business, the financial side of things is always pushed. “We never had sufficient capital to do what we wanted, and you always underestimate what the demand for capital probably is.”

“The potential for expansion was always there,” says Maureen, “but you had to have the capital.”

Peter says that small-to-medium business owners need to drive things. “You’ve got to be the one driving it and making it all happen. But at the same time, don’t get overloaded. Put structures and processes in place and make yourself dispensable.”

The gardens

In 2009 Chantal expanded into market gardening, growing vegetables to supply their own store and others. “We couldn’t get enough organic veggies. It was all about supply lines, and our belief that the heart and soul of organic stores is the produce,” says Peter.

Son-in-law Ben Duclercq joined the Chantal vegetable operation on his arrival in New Zealand in 2013.

In October 2020, Ben established Petit Jardin, a 0.8 acre smallholding in Bay View, where he grows vegetables and seedlings for Chantal, supplies one

A man wearing a blue jacket, a yellow beanie with the letters 'WV' on it, and dark pants is walking away from the camera through a field of tall grass. He has a tool belt with a shovel and other tools. A flock of white ducks is following him from behind. The background consists of a dense line of dark green trees.

**"It's about
growing better,
not bigger."**

Ben Duclercq,
Petit Jardin

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Maureen Alexander Ward

of the smartest restaurants in the Bay, and sells mixed fruit and veggie boxes to local customers.

Ben follows organic principles and grows using a no-till method. He says that his growing methods offer "better yields and fewer weeds, with the added advantage of not turning the soil into mud".

Unashamedly, Ben's philosophy is to keep it small. "It's about growing better, not bigger," he says. A tour of the garden shows row upon row of plants in rude health, and a good variety, even in early winter.

Chantal 2.0

By 2016, Peter and Maureen had been at the helm of Chantal for more than 30 years. They "had run out of puff", and didn't have a firm exit plan in place.

"In a lot of ways we were holding the businesses back," says Peter.

Daughter Tess and partner Tim were planning to relocate to Hawke's Bay from Auckland.

"We thought we might work in the business," explains Tim. "But then Peter got approached with an offer."

That approach gave Tim and Tess the opportunity to buy into Chantal, originally in partnership with the new owner. These days, Tim and Tess have exited Chantal wholesale, and have full operational control of the Chantal retail operation, in co-ownership with the new owners of Chantal.

Since taking over the shop, there's been a few changes.

Tess says that one of the biggest differences was bringing in a point of sale system.

"Prior to that everything was paper based. Mum and Dad wanted to bring it in earlier, but it's quite a lot of work, if you look at how many products we have (4000-5000 SKUs). That's a lot for a shop our size.

Another big change was outsourcing the café to an independent operator,



Hapī. "We didn't have any experience in running a café," explains Tim. "We just thought that Hapī would be a much better fit.

"All the best independent hospitality businesses generally have the owner working either front of house or in the kitchen," says Tim.

"And neither of us has the desire or skill set," adds Tess.

As for the product range, it's come a long way since the early days. Of the trends and development in vegetarianism and organics and how it influences Chantal's range, Tim says that Peter and Maureen jumped on them before they came along.

"But there's more fads now, and they come faster. People are more conscious of what they're eating. All of a sudden you'll start selling more of something. And then you have to follow up. Why are these people buying this?"

Tim says deciding what new stock to range is a mix of what people ask for, "but also sticking with our kaupapa. We try to keep things organic and local as a point of difference. We can't be jumping on the fad that doesn't fit with Chantal. We just try to put that simple frame on it."

Other than the challenge of the

pandemic years, maintaining supply line connections is a major challenge.

"There are more and more challenges for small producers and smaller growers. It's not just about finding markets for what we sell, it's actually finding people to supply it.

"The cyclone really highlighted that, showing that local food security is very important," says Tim.

As for where to next, Tim and Tess say the past couple of years hasn't allowed the space for grand plans, and that will be the case for the next 12 months too. They see a clear role for Chantal as part of the community.

Tess sees Chantal's competitive advantage as being somewhere where people want to go, as a place to keep connections with the local community.

"The people that come here, do feel connected with everyone else around them. It just increases the sense that this is more than just a place to shop for food."

These days, Chantal is a seven-day retail operation, employing around 20 people. Tess can often be found on the shop floor, and has a thing for fully stocked, tidy shelves. Tim's more likely to be out back, loading new products and specials into the POS system.



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Tess Alexander Ward, Chantal store

CHANTAL TIMELINE

- 1978 Chantal co-op established
- 1979 Ward Alexanders return to Hawke’s Bay, join co-op
- 1983 Chantal shop opens
- 1987 Ward Alexanders become sole owners
- 1999 Wholesale business moves to new premises
- 2009 Started organic gardens, growing to 45 acres
- 2012 Chantal café opens
- 2013 Ben Duclercq joins organic garden business
- 2014 Purchased Norton Rd orchard
- 2016 Sold Chantal to third party
- 2016 Tess and Tim buy into Chantal
- 2019 Hapī becomes Chantal café operator
- 2020 Orchard sold
- 2020 Ben Duclercq starts Petit Jardin
- 2020 Poppa Pete’s juices launched

Insights into the Chantal shop range

- Fresh and local produce dominate the top-sellers
- 8 of the top 10 sellers are locally sourced
- Petane salvaged wine has entered Top 10 sellers post cyclone
- Key bulk products – pumpkin seeds, Otago slab apricots, Chia seeds, Brazil nuts, oats are nudging the Top 10
- Niche products: powders such as maca, ashwagandha, moringa, ceremonial cacao
- Seaweeds are on the up, wild-harvested horopito, black salt for those wanting a vegan egg taste.
- Wide range of products in the herbal dispensary, such as licorice root, slippery elm, valerian, and Siberian ginseng.

As to whether they’ve got another 40 years ahead of them, Tess says some days she can see her and Tim running Chantal until they retire. Tim says he’s hoping for a slightly earlier retirement than his in-laws.

Retirement? Really?

When Peter and Maureen sold Chantal in 2016, it was supposed to be time for retirement. They had worked very hard, working full time in other careers alongside a growing Chantal. But instead, after Chantal came a 28 acre organic apple orchard in Norton Road, Hastings.

“And we started growing veggies, and doing a whole lot of things out there,” says Peter.

“But it got to a stage where it was wearing me out again ... if I was a 25 year-old, I would’ve taken on the

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Tim Stevens, Chantal store

challenge. So we decided we would sell up and did so during the COVID lockdown.”

Peter’s latest venture is a small organic juice business called Poppa Pete’s. Started during the Norton Road orchard days under a different name, Poppa Pete’s is a one litre glass bottle range of organic apple and organic blended juices. The juice is clean, crisp and true to the varieties contained within. Peter sells his juices from

his farm gate stall in Scarrott Road Bay View, through Chantal, directly to some stores, and through the connection with Chantal Wholesale to other organic stockists throughout New Zealand.

By the end of the interview it was time for the legacy discussion. Maureen was doing grandparent stuff, leaving Peter to wrap things up. Too humble to be drawn on whether he feels proud of what he and Maureen created, instead he flips to talking about family and the achievement of others. “When I look out there and see what Ben is doing, what Tess and Tim are doing, and Greta at Hapī, that makes me feel really good.”

Which, if you think about it, is exactly how it should be. Thanks Chantal. Here’s to the next 40 years. ●