



## LIFE & STYLE

# Pursuing crisp perfection

By ALISTAIR PAULIN - The Nelson Mail    Last updated 14:21 03/03/2009

It's a long search for the perfect crisp, but a Moutere couple have demonstrated that it can all be worth it.

The question of what makes the perfect potato chip sounds like the kind of idle musing that might happen somewhere into the second jug on a rainy Saturday afternoon.

But for the founders of Upper Moutere's Proper Crisps, it turned into a quest that lasted several years and ate up their life savings.

Kathryn and Stuart Franklin are refugees from Big Food. In their native England, Kathryn was a food technologist developing new products for Campbell's Soup and Stuart was a marketer for Warburton's, one of the country's largest bakers. They commuted an hour to their jobs, in opposite directions.

In 2005 they pulled the plug and moved to New Zealand, searching for the best place to live and a niche to start their own business.

While enjoying a clear mid-winter's day lunch at Mapua's Smokehouse, they knew they had found home. And they realised that the hand-cooked potato chip trend, popularised by English brands like Burt's and Tyrell's and hundreds of regional producers in America, had yet to hit New Zealand. "We knew if we didn't do it, somebody else would," said Stuart.

But they still had to learn how to make chips, or crisps, as they call their snack. They wanted to differentiate themselves from mass-produced chips and besides, said Kathryn, "it's a nice descriptive word that tells you what they're going to be".

Most handmade food products are developed in a home kitchen and perhaps move to a garage before stepping up commercial-kitchen scale but the Franklins, following some experiments in their kitchen, quickly realised that home was no place for a vat of scalding oil.

So in 2007, they set off on an expedition to visit other makers of hand-cooked chips. Over two months they visited more than a dozen operations in the United Kingdom, Sweden and the United States.

The doors were thrown open for them when chip makers heard they had come all the way from the other side of the world and presented no competition. "Playing the New Zealand card worked really well," said Stuart.

One of their first visits, to a Pennsylvania maker, made it seem doable. Despite the well-worn 100-year-old factory and the fact they were cooking in lard, Kathryn said it "demystified" the process for them.

Now they needed the right equipment and this is where their mysterious chip guru entered the picture. Since he was the key to them setting up their operation the Franklins won't spill his identity for fear someone could copy their efforts. Apparently he is the scion of an American chip-making family so we'll give the chip off the old block a distinctive American name. Let's call him Chip.

Chip took them to visit several factories, advised them on what equipment they needed for a production line, hunted down the components, reconditioned them to run on LPG and New Zealand current, and put them on a container bound for Nelson. And all it cost the Franklins was their life savings.

But the help was invaluable. "What he doesn't know about making crisps isn't worth knowing," says Stuart.

They still had to find a facility and put their factory together. Luckily they heard about a former jam-making facility in Upper Moutere, 10 minutes from their house, and Kathryn's father, a retired maintenance engineer for Rolls-Royce came to help them assemble their equipment.

"We figured if he could fix Rolls-Royce aircraft engines he could put together a deep fryer," said Stuart.

It took two months of tinkering and tasting before they were happy. Every step was a huge learning curve, from working out how thin to slice potatoes ("I could tell you to the thousandth of an inch but I'm not going to," says Stuart) to finding the right tool to stir the chips in the fryer.

Stuart uses a stainless steel rake but after the first one fell to bits, he couldn't find another anywhere in New Zealand. His parents bought two at an English garden shop, removed the shafts and air-freighted them over.

Along the way, several failed batches got tipped over the fence to be eaten by their landlord's sheep, and the regulars at the Moutere Inn got to do some taste testing.

Once they perfected their technique, they brought samples to the Friday market at Founder's Park at the end of last November, where they got feedback like "they taste like crisps used to taste".

They knew they had a great product, but would people pay \$4.50 for a 150 gram bag of potato chips when "they could get a packet of Bluebirds at Pak'nSave for 99 cents", as Stuart puts it.

That is their critical question for 2009 but the Franklins are confident. They have just sent their largest order yet, 70 boxes, to Nosh, an upscale deli in Auckland, and they say their best customers are places like the Sprig and Fern and Delicious.

They reason that the same people who will pay \$8 for a pint of handcrafted beer want to complement their drink with a natural snack where the potato flavour isn't masked by god-knows-what additives, and understand that hand-cooked crisps are an artisanal product.

Hand-cooked, in this case, means six hands. They convinced their friend Tim Loach to join their business and on cooking days, they each take a station in the factory a stone's throw from Upper Moutere School.

Tim may be on the spud end: taking a few kilos of potatoes from an 800kg bin and putting them through the peeler which spits them out onto a stainless steel inspection table where he'll check them for any defects. From there they go into the finely calibrated slicer and then the cook takes over.

Stuart slides the slices into the kettle filled with sunflower oil and gently stirs them with his rake while monitoring the heat of the oil, which cools when the potatoes enter. Controlling the "time/temperature curve" is the key to getting the desired crispness and golden colour but Stuart says making crisps by hand is both an art and a science.

Once cooked, a hydraulic arm scoops the crisps out, drains them and tips them onto a sorting table where Kathryn, the self-confessed perfectionist, takes over. She rejects the odd crisp that may have been left behind from a previous batch and overcooked, salts them with Marlborough sea salt while they are still warm and sets them in bins to cool.

Once cooled, the crisps go into a vibrafeed hopper, which feeds them in a steady flow down to the measuring and bagging station where 150 grams are trapped by a weight-triggered trap-door. Kathryn uses a foot pedal to open the lower trap door to drop the crisps into the bag, which she then seals and places in a carton.

It's a labour-intensive, hot, steamy operation but the Franklins say that's what it takes to get hand-cooked quality as opposed to the fully-automated continuous-cook operations run by the snack food giants.

"We'd never move away from hand-cooked," says Stuart.