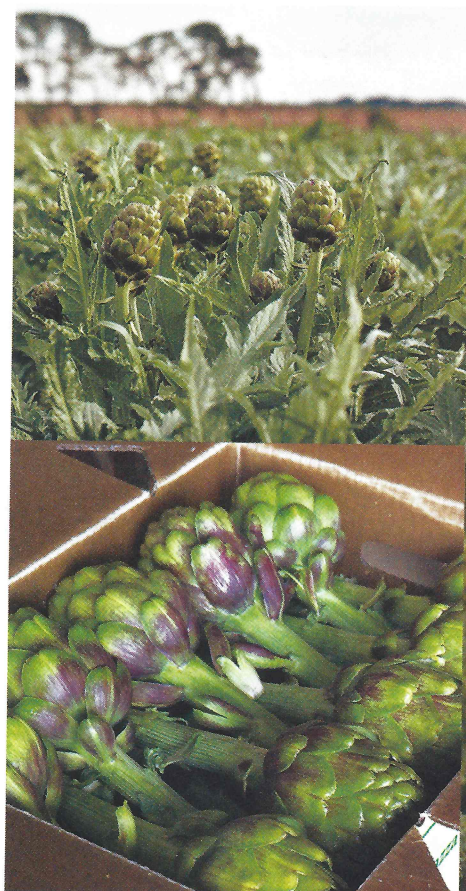




OUR GROWER'S STORY

AROUND THE GLOBE

THEY MAY LOOK A LITTLE
THISTLY, BUT FARMER ROSS
MAZZA SAYS GLOBE ARTICHOKE
REALLY ARE TENDER AT HEART.
ANNA SCOBIE REPORTS.



salt and pepper. You put the stuffing between the leaves so that as you eat the flesh from the outer leaves, you get the filling as well. As you get further inside towards the heart, you get more and more of the artichoke flesh."

Ross's father, Giovanni, started growing artichokes when he bought the 15 hectare farm in 1945. Market gardening was in its heyday back then, so Giovanni grew a little bit of everything, as did most of his neighbours. But by the time Ross took over it was more economical to specialise in one or two crops. The Mazzas continued with artichokes because they were one of Giovanni's favourites and well suited to the region's slightly saline soil and coastal climate.

"Dad was one of the leaders in the early days of growing artichokes – he was very well known for them. But the thing he loved most about them was that you don't have to bend down low to pick them!" laughs Ross. "I really enjoy picking them but I also like the process of growing them – it's a joy to watch."

Artichokes are traditionally a spring vegetable, but Ross is growing a new variety called Imperial Star (patent variety) that is ready for picking in mid-winter. "We harvest the bulk of the crop in July, August and September – it peaks around the footy grand final – but we can still be picking up until Christmas time. We usually harvest about 300,000 to 500,000 artichoke heads per season."

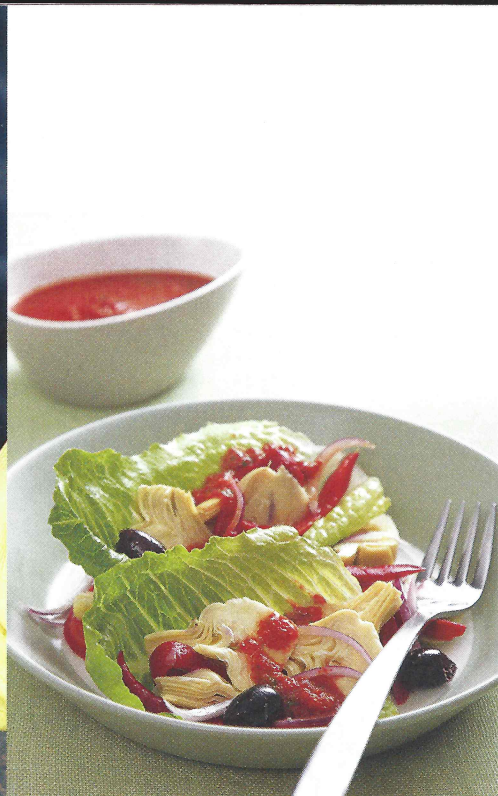
When Giovanni retired, Ross found it was too much for him to run the farm and also manage the sales side of the business. So when he met Tony Simonetta in 1976, the timing could not have been better. "When I was introduced to Tony, we shook hands and liked each other right from the start. We have been doing business ever since." Tony became Ross's agent for the artichokes, handling all of the sales and marketing.

Three years later, Tony set up Perfection Fresh, which has since become a leading supplier of a wide range of fruit and vegetables – Ross's artichokes included.

When Ross Mazza started running the family farm in South Werribee, Victoria, in 1975, one of his main crops was globe artichokes.

This unusual vegetable is actually the flower bud of a large, thistle-like plant and although it had long been popular in Mediterranean countries, it was relatively unknown to most Australians.

"My parents are from Sicily, so I grew up eating artichokes," says Ross (pictured above). "During the season, Mum would cook them almost weekly. My wife, Josephine, prepares them a similar way now – stuffed with breadcrumbs, eggs, parsley,



Globe artichoke & roasted capsicum salad

Prep: 45 minutes

Cooking: 1 hour 15 minutes Serves: 4

8 globe artichokes

4 red capsicums

cos lettuce

½ cup red onion, sliced

½ cup olives

⅓ cup balsamic vinegar

¼ cup white wine vinegar

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 tbs fresh basil, chopped

1 tbs fresh rosemary, chopped

1 Slice artichoke tops off crosswise. Trim stems and thorns and discard lower leaves. Boil or steam for about 30 minutes.

2 Drain and cool. Halve lengthways and scoop out centre. Remove outer leaves. Trim hearts and slice thinly. Cover and set aside.

3 Grill whole capsicums until charred on all sides. Remove and place in a paper bag for 15 minutes to steam skins. Remove stems, seeds and ribs. Peel off skin and slice capsicum into strips. Reserve a quarter of the strips for dressing.

4 To assemble salad, arrange lettuce leaves on a plate. Top with sliced artichoke hearts, capsicum strips, onion and olives.

5 For dressing, process reserved capsicum with vinegars, garlic, basil and rosemary until well blended and nearly smooth. Drizzle over salads.

“Artichokes can be added raw, whole, sliced, or quartered to stews, casseroles and soups. In addition, they can be chilled and sliced to be used in salads.”

COLIN HUDGSON
BUSINESS MANAGER FRESH PRODUCE



Tony's three sons, Michael, Vince and John now work for the company as well, in the roles of CEO, Director of Sales and Chief Operations Officer respectively.

“Ross has been a key supplier of ours for many years, and is one of the best in his field,” says Michael. “When we first started with artichokes, the average Australian consumer knew very little about this strange looking vegetable. But with Ross's help, and with the help of Woolworths, we have tried to bring the artichoke to greater prominence.”

Perfection Fresh began supplying vegetables to Woolworths in late 1987, and approached the company about stocking artichokes in the early nineties. “We asked if they would help us make the average Australian more aware

of them, and they were very happy to do that,” says Michael.

Artichokes have become increasingly popular, but they're not quite mainstream yet.

For those who haven't yet sampled their unique flavour, here is what to do. Trim artichoke stems to about 6cm and remove the coarse lower leaves. Trim about 2cm from the top of the globes and then boil, steam or bake them.

You eat artichokes with your fingers, pulling out the leaves and scraping the fleshy side against your teeth. The heart itself is entirely edible, as is the inner part of the stem. They are often served with sauces such as hollandaise, vinaigrette or melted butter to dip the leaves in.