



ARTICHOKES DOWN UNDER

For years I had been dreaming of visiting the very far off country of Australia. In the recent past, repetitive images would surface of Crocodile Dundee, beckoning, almost enticing me to come 'Down Under' to his most interesting and huge home-land, And it is immense! Not everyone realizes that the land mass of the continent-nation of Australia (2,966,151 sq. mi.) is almost as large of that of the United States, which is slightly more than 3 million square miles (3,020,470). Australia's population has just gone over the 18 million mark, and if you ask the Australians, be they Caucasians or Aborigines, they would rather maintain that unusual ratio of people to land; they have an innate aversion to overcrowding, and they're not at all interested in additional immigration, after the abandonment of indiscriminate arrivals in the past.

But, my purpose in including Australia here in this account of artichokes, is not to describe the noteworthy characteristics of this wonderful country, (although I would love to ramble on and write about its marvelously hospitable people, and its

unusually interesting sights, flora and fauna), but to single out an area, on the Werribee River, in the environs of the town of Werribee itself which, among the artichoke producing countries already cited, also produces artichokes commercially, albeit on a more modest scale.

I was thrilled to learn of this, when by an unusual happenstance, in exploring accommodations for our visit to Melbourne, I was put into touch with a recently retired Dep't of Agriculture official, Mr. John Sutherland, at first a faceless image over the phone who materialized, on later meeting him and his gracious wife, Cheryl, into a true friend. None of what I am now narrating could have ever come about without the ever congenial John and his most knowledgeable expertise of artichokes, the area of Werribee and the artichoke producers themselves, whom he has known for many years, and to whom he introduced me. Small producers, if you will, but serious individualists, hard-working who till the soil themselves and proudly harvest their own product.

The town of Werribee has been described as a treasure trove of Australian history,

because it is one of the first settlements in the colonization of this remarkable country. In being escorted around by John Sutherland to the various artichoke farms, all neatly plowed and worked on, or to the large tracts containing orderly arranged rows of artichoke plants, some of them bearing artichokes almost ready to be harvested, I found the countryside to be a bucolic haven and I was very much impressed by the industriousness and the gentility of the growers themselves. There was Sam Fragapane, the resourceful entrepreneur and the recognized father of the first commercial artichoke production, who took up growing artichokes when he arrived in Melbourne, years before from Italy. Sam confided to us that his secret in having the best and largest artichokes (the envy of his neighbors who were seen prowling around, even at night, in an attempt to discover the reason), was to mix with the regular irrigation water his own well water, richer in minerals, and especially in chlorides. The other farmers, he says, theorized it might be the chicken manure that he originally used, much stronger and more productive than the other fertilizers. Be that as it may, he became the artichoke king of the area, and later branched out into other enterprises (Monte Villa Inn, Nurseries, etc.).

Other producers I met and spoke with regarding a possible network association of their fledgling industry with the other artichoke producing areas of Europe and the Americas, are; 1) Ross Mazza on Cuttriss Rd, in Werribee who was tilling his soil in preparation for planting. He graciously came down from the tractor he was driving, showed us his artichoke fields which were going to be harvested the following week, and allowed us to photograph some of the full grown artichokes, mature enough for picking. 2)

Tony Pepe, also of Cuttriss Rd., whom I jokingly dubbed the smiling Italian, because he was always smiling, (not unlike the smiling Irishman), and his brother Greg. 3) Joseph and Nick Fragapane, nephews of Sam, who are carrying on the growing of artichokes and other crops. 4) Con Ballan of Lot 1 Shaws Rd., whom I fondly referred to as the 'doubting Thomas', because he expressed some negative thoughts on the future of the artichoke industry. notwithstanding his earnest devotion to his farm and crops. 5) Joseph Scacciante of Farrants Rd. 6) Steve Putrino who showed us around his farm. 7) Nick and Paolo Tullio, who were busily preparing a shipment of vegetables for Thailand.

I believe it was one of these gentlemen who had mentioned the 'Black Artichoke' variety,



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indigenous to this area of Australia, which was later described to me as “ the original dark, purple artichoke, pointed in the shape of a cone, endowed with thorns, but tastier and more succulent than the other more common globe variety”. This unusual artichoke is grown and harvested late in the season, but is declining in popularity, as are unfortunately all artichokes of the area according to Con Ballan.

I was sorry not to have been able to touch base with Frank Battaglia and others because of time constraints, but I plan to contact them by letter, fax or phone. My purpose in meeting with the producers was to explore their interest, if any, in associating with the artichoke network, already in existence in other countries. I left them with the suggestion that they meet, think and discuss the possibility of a sister city relationship with Ladispoli in Rome, Castroville in California, Benicarlo in Spain and St. Pol de Leon in Brittany, France. Already a few of these cities are networking and interchanging views and methods of planting, the treatments of blights of their respective crops, and sending students to each other's country. Seminars are also being organized to update each other on the latest scientific findings on artichokes, and other topics of mutual interest.

Even though, their artichoke commercial

industry is modest compared to that in the USA and other European areas, the Australians might want to know what is happening in other artichoke producing countries, the problems they are confronted with and how they overcome them. In an assembly room, graciously provided by the dean of the Australian commercial artichokes, Sam Fragapane, who had invited all artichoke producers to a festive barbecue (or ‘barbie’), as they say Down Under, I mentioned to the producers that I would keep in touch with them and forward on to them, upon publication, a copy they requested of ‘The Sensuous Artichoke’ that more fully explains the details of the artichoke network. .

I left the group with the feeling that this young industry could, with time and the appropriate marketing required to familiarize the world around it with their luscious product, satisfy the humongous, beckoning southeast Asian markets and beyond. In my view, it will indeed be a challenge for the fledgling commercial artichoke industry in Werribee, Australia to meet the future demand of this most promising and exciting vegetable in the huge area around it.



Ross Mazza in his fields of artichokes in Werribee (outside of Melbourne), Australia. The artichokes are just about ready to be harvested. Werribee, Australia.