

Christine Nikiel: A superior breed of bib-dribble

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For an 18-month-old, Eve Rebbeck has an adventurous palate, happily scoffing delicacies such as blue cheese, scallops and whitebait. The young foodie also enjoys being an informal part of the testing chain for Green Monkey, a Christchurch-based organic baby food exporter which her mum, Charlotte Rebbeck, set up in 2004.

Eve willingly slurps down Green Monkey's mixtures of pumpkin, kumara and silverbeet, apple and blueberry, and carrot and parsnip before they're shipped off to the US, Hong Kong, Dubai and Australia, where Green Monkey exports most of its products.

The award-winning company (three gold Massey University food awards and an Organics NZ Enterprise Award) supplies high-end organic and natural products stores overseas and a small range of organic stores in New Zealand.

Managing director Rebbeck won't talk exact figures, but says the company is not yet making a profit. However, despite being in the depths of a recession, she's positive about the coming year, planning to introduce two meat products. Later, she plans to expand into organic juice and snacks for children and adults.

"People spend money on their babies; they'll go and buy a buggy which lasts three years, but healthy eating lasts a lifetime and people do know that. And New Zealand is known for its pristine environment, its excellent growing conditions – it's very well-regarded."

While Fonterra's involvement in the San Lu milk powder scandal was a "black mark" against New Zealand's name, Rebbeck doesn't believe it will damage the country's reputation.

Initially a frozen baby food producer, Green Monkey's exports really took off when it introduced fresh food in a specially designed plastic pouch early last year.

Rebbeck set up the company with sister Lizzie Dyer, prompted by their inability to find anything tasty and nutritious for babies to eat, in particular Dyer's fussy toddler.

The pair started off supplying local retailers with frozen fruit and vegetable mixtures they'd cooked up in Rebbeck's kitchen. However, frozen product was cumbersome to deliver and had limited locations in-store. When Dyer stepped back from the business, Rebbeck hired consultant Andy Macbeth, a former CEO of Cookie Time, to take care of the strategic side of things.

The pair consulted nutritionists, food scientists and food export compliance advisers until they found Kaweka Foods, a Hastings manufacturer which used Japanese-made thermal pouches for its own exported products. The pouches, made of polyethylene, keep oxygen out, giving the food a shelf-life of 12 months from the date of packaging.

Rebbeck hasn't made it easy for herself. From the beginning she said no to preservatives, additives and anything imported or non-organic, and those attributes are now the company's point of difference from other brands.

No other New Zealand baby food maker uses only New Zealand-grown organic food or lists all its ingredients, she claims. Watties baby food is not manufactured in New Zealand and Green Monkey's closest competition, Only Organics, imports some of its ingredients.

The point of difference has also made the range expensive for consumers, but Rebbeck is unapologetic.



Charlotte Rebbeck's 18-month-old daughter, Eve, is a willing taste-tester. Photo / Simon Baker

"I'm not interested in making a cheaper product. We've had the odd person say 'I can't afford it', but that's fine. We're trying to be super-premium; we don't want to be just an average product."

Customers are generally "educated people who are time-deprived and know about the importance of good food".

Being super-premium has also meant much higher costs. Aware that they'd need to stand out in a crowd, Rebbeck and Macbeth, who is now a 50 per cent shareholder in the company (Rebbeck and Dyer split the other 50 between them) spent a lot of time and money on the packaging design.

The pouches bear little resemblance to traditional baby food packaging. There's an element of Kiwiana and nature – but no pastel colours and not a baby in sight.

The pair linked their organic focus with an eco-friendly approach to packaging. The pouch holder used for shipping is made from recycled fibre and is printed with vegetable inks. The pouches themselves aren't recyclable, but Rebbeck says they use less energy to make and are lighter to transport than jars and tins.

They are also designed for convenience: they can be heated in a cup of hot water and fit New Zealand Post's letter specification sizes – useful when sending out samples to prospective customers.

Rebbeck and Macbeth also spent many hours matching each country's strict food market requirements to their packaging.

Because Green Monkey's pouches are printed, if anything is wrong Rebbeck can't just peel off the labels and apply new ones. And because New Zealand labelling requirements are different, she can't sell export-labelled pouches in this country.

That means if the US Food and Drug Administration reject the product, the whole container-load must be dumped, while the authorities in Dubai simply destroy the product themselves, she says.

All growers must be certified organic byASUREQuality New Zealand, a food safety verification, quality assurance and biosecurity service provider, and, like Green Monkey, are audited each year.

Local retailers are keen to support local enterprise. Organic and natural products retailer Huckleberry Farms stocks Green Monkey in each of its three Auckland stores.

Managing director Dave Spalter says sales so far are "steady".

"It's a new concept from the traditional jars and tins; it'll take a while before they start running out the door".

However, his customers like that the company is local and uses local produce, and Spalter says the company's philosophies fit with those of his business.

"The investment is big, and the temptation is to go for long shelf-life using preservatives and cheaper alternatives such as non-organic, but they've done it properly. You've got to applaud companies like that."