

\$4m plant upgrade to help move into Aussie

ALAN WOOD
investigates what it
takes to break into
the Australian
supermarket market.

Barker's of Geraldine has invested \$4 million in its manufacturing plant near Geraldine as it launches syrups into Australian supermarkets for the first time.

Australian supermarket chain Coles would start selling the Barker's fruit syrups from late September, director and part owner of the business Michael Barker said.

About 800 Coles retail outlets would stock four of Barker's fruit syrups, based around blackcurrants, apricots, orange and barley with passionfruit and lemon, honey and ginger, with the sourcing of components outlined on product labels.

"We've never taken our fruit juice syrups into Australia before, because it's a big market and it's

very, very hard to go into a market like Australia... (with) a communication strategy.

"You're very reliant on your label to be effective on the shelf, and you've got to try and do some tastings over there which cost a lot of money. Then you've got to hope they love it."

It took 12 months since the initial visit to Coles to get the paperwork completed for trans-Tasman supply.

The Barker's-owned Anathoth brand, bought in 2007-08, was already performing very strongly across the Tasman.

Barker said about half the \$4m investment was in a purpose-built "hot fill" bottling line, installed last year to replace equipment dating back to 1981 when Barker's Blackcurrant Syrup was first launched.

The new faster line would be able to "pack out" the same amount of bottles in one shift previously done in three, he said.

The company still tried to source New Zealand grown fruit where possible, though imports were used in some cases, for example cranberries not grown in

quantity in New Zealand were sourced from Canada.

The new bottling line had to have the flexibility to cater for a wide range of preserves and juice products in a variety of different-sized glass or plastic jars and bottles, Barker said.

There were no plans to list the company that had thrived through organic growth and used debt.

The company was established in 1969 by Michael's farmer parents Anthony and Gillian Barker as a cottage industry to make elderberry wine from wild elderberries.

The privately held firm, with some other South Island-based shareholders, had gradually expanded and had total revenues of just over \$50 million. Sales of Barker's fruit syrups were up by 30 per cent in the 12 months to July from the prior year.

The products are manufactured on a corner of a downsized family farm, just 8km outside of the South Canterbury town with 140 full time and 50 part time staff making it the biggest employer in Geraldine.

Expanding: Barker's director and part owner Michael Barker.

