

Brothers Grima

With rhubarb enjoying a culinary renaissance, these Sydney farmers are seeing red and talking the stalk.

Words **Eva-Maria Bobbert**
Photography **Luke Burgess**

Sam (left) and Steve Grima inspect their ravishing rhubarb crop. **Below:** Although rhubarb is botanically a vegetable it's traditionally eaten as a fruit.



If all the world's a stage, as Shakespeare penned, then I am witness to an unexpectedly comic scene. Standing on the "podium" (a mound of soil overlooking vegetable fields), brothers Steve and Sam Grima seem unaware of their audience (me and a paddock of rhubarb stalks). "Beautiful!" cries Steve, gesturing in a passionate fashion (not, by the way, in my direction). "... she's looking good," Sam cuts in. It's rare to see grown men gushing about vegetables, but these guys are so enraptured by their star crop that they're finishing each other's sentences at a pace that's impossible to follow. "Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb," is about all I can make out.

As far as culinary fashion goes, rhubarb has had a revival. The reddish stalks with the bitter, lemon-like taste that were popular in

our grandparents' day are popping up in sweet and savoury recipes in almost every cookbook and gracing the menus of most city restaurants. Having shaken off its old-fashioned image, rhubarb is well and truly in vogue.

The brothers Grima are certainly relishing the newfound popularity of *Rheum rhabonticum*. Having expanded the small patch of land their Maltese father purchased when he migrated to Australia in the 1950s, Sam and Steve Grima run one of the few farms still existing in the Sydney basin. This traditional agricultural area may be making way for housing estates and shopping centres as Sydney's urban sprawl spreads faster than a noxious

Did you know?

- Records show that rhubarb was used for medicinal purposes in China as far back as 2700 BC. It has been known in Europe as an effective laxative and digestive aid since the 18th century.
- The ruby-red stalks are high in dietary fibre and supply some vitamin C. The leaves, on the other hand, are highly poisonous. They contain high concentrations of oxalic acid, which can cause the tongue and throat to swell, preventing breathing. Always remove the leaves before cooking.
- When choosing rhubarb in the supermarket, look for firm stems with a reddish colour. There is also a variety with green stalks (the stalks remain green when cooked).



Steve is rightly proud of his healthy crop. **Above:** A newly planted rhubarb sends up its first stalks.

weed, but the Grimas have no plans to sell up and subdivide just yet.

“We’re married to this job,” jokes Steve. “It’s like a marriage, but we work together for the good of both of our families.” The brothers split the work to make the most of their individual skills: Sam, 39, mainly handles transport and selling the crop, and Steve, 34, is hands-on in the field each day.

While they also grow beetroot, silver beet and baby fennel, six years ago the brothers took a gamble that the demand for rhubarb would continue to rise. Growing plants from quality cuttings rather than from seed, they developed rhubarb into their main crop. “You can’t get a rich, resilient crop if you grow from seed, so we started with 1000 plants from a retired rhubarb grower,” says Sam.

Those 1000 plants quickly multiplied as, once in the ground, four new plants can offshoot from the original cutting. “We pick the first mature stems about four months after planting,” says Sam. The stalks reshoot after a month or two and are then plucked again.

Plantings are staggered throughout February and March to ensure a continuous supply of rhubarb. Then, during picking season, the brothers get up early four days a week to harvest the crop. There’s quite a knack to picking the stalks. You need to grab each one at the base, then snap it off with a twist of the wrist. Bunches of 10 stalks are banded together in the field before being placed in tractor-drawn bins and moved to the on-site warehouse. It’s then hosed down and rushed to the coolroom. “Once it’s been picked, rhubarb starts to die unless we keep it between 0-5°C,” says Sam.

It’s Sam’s job to get up in the middle of the night to take the crop to the Sydney Produce Market at Flemington three days a week. “There’s nothing like our local rhubarb – it’s so fresh to market,” he says. “We are now the largest suppliers in the Sydney basin, selling up to 2000 bunches a week in the high season.”

One of their biggest customers is Hydro Produce, which quality-checks each bunch of rhubarb for cleanliness, stalk length and colour before shipping it out to Woolworths supermarkets.



From far left: This wave of green hides a red sea; there's quite a knack to picking these stalks correctly – a firm grasp and a quick twist of the wrist gives the requisite clean break; Steve heads to the farm's warehouse with the pick of the bunch.

This month the Grimas are gearing up for their main picking season, which runs from May to October. “But you can’t just keep picking it forever because, although the stems regrow, they regrow shorter each time,” says Steve. So once a year they uproot the crop and start again. “Around Christmas we pull the plants out by hand,” continues Sam. The intertwined roots are then divided into two and transplanted back in the earth before winter. It’s a laborious process: two days are spent digging up the rhubarb, four

“We are now the largest suppliers in the Sydney basin, selling up to 2000 bunches a week in the high season.”

days are needed for the precise splitting of the roots and another four days to replant them. “Sometimes the whole family gets involved just so that we can get through,” says Sam.

In summer, sprinklers are used throughout the day to keep the plants hydrated; in winter, they’re irrigated once or twice a week. Although it will grow all year round, rhubarb is happiest in winter, which explains why it’s always been so popular in Europe. “Rhubarb loves a good frost – the cold produces a deep red colour in the stems,” says Steve. “It doesn’t like warm weather and tends to stress in summer.” In fact, it refuses to grow if it’s too hot.

But it’s weeds that cause the problems. “They steal nutrients from the plants and can choke them,” says Sam. “We can’t spray the weeds in summer or we’ll kill the plants, so we have to pull weeds out by hand.” So, as they’re picking their crop, they’re also clearing weeds. “It’s not all bad,” says Steve. “As much work as weeding requires, the weeds themselves are a good sign. They mean the soil is aerated and you don’t really have to mulch.”

Each season is different, largely due to changing weather patterns. In 2003, the Grimas lost 50 per cent of their crop because temperatures were too high in the early stages of the growth cycle. “It’s like being on a roller coaster, but we just go with the ride,” laughs Sam. It might all be rhubarb to you and me, but nothing makes Steve and Sam prouder than seeing the labour of their love on display. “I can walk into Woolworths and recognise our rhubarb from the other side of the store,” says Steve. “It just looks different from anyone else’s.”

AGT



Honey-roasted rhubarb & goat's cheese brioche

Serves: 4 Prep: 10 mins (+15 mins cooling time)

Cooking: 25 mins

- 1 bunch rhubarb, washed, leaves removed, trimmed
- 2 tsp honey
- 4 slices brioche or fruit bread
- 1 x 150g ctn Soignon spreadable goat's cheese
- Honey, extra, to serve

1. Preheat oven to 180°C. Line a baking tray with non-stick baking paper. Cut rhubarb into 10-12cm lengths. Place the rhubarb pieces close together on the lined tray. Drizzle over the honey. Bake in oven for 15 minutes or until tender. Remove from oven and set aside for 15 minutes to cool completely.
2. Preheat a grill on high. Place the brioche or fruit bread on a baking tray. Toast for 2-3 minutes each side or until crisp and golden.
3. Spread the goat's cheese evenly over the toasted brioche or fruit bread. Top with the honey-roasted rhubarb and pour over any pan juices. Drizzle evenly with extra honey and serve immediately.