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In just a decade, Pic's Peanut Butter has gone from a Nelson farmers' market favourite to a rising star of the New Zealand export scene.

STORY **MATT PHILP** PHOTOGRAPHY **KATE MACPHERSON**

PIC PICOT HAS often been called the “Willy Wonka of peanut butter”, and now he has a factory that justifies that tag. The new multi-million-dollar Pic's Peanut Butter factory and office complex in Nelson is still a work in progress when *Kia Ora* visits. Even so, it's an impressive building, with a two-storey glazed wall facing the street and an entrance large enough to drive an Airstream caravan through and into the foyer (which is in Picot's plans, by the way). Once up and running, the factory will triple production, with the potential to boost the company's annual turnover to \$50 million.

It has been 10 years since Picot sold his first jars of homemade peanut butter at a Nelson farmers' market. In that time the business has shifted from his garage, to a leased kitchen, to a succession of factories in a nearby industrial estate. Each move was funded from revenue, but this shift is of a different order.

“It's a bit nerve-racking and I'm finding myself getting a bit anxious because it's such a huge investment, and such a huge statement – this building – for Nelson,” says Picot, who launched his business in 2007 with the expectation of perhaps earning a couple of hundred dollars a week. “We're a wicked multinational corporation now!”

He can joke, but Pic's is a seriously successful food business. It easily dominates New Zealand peanut butter sales by value, and has forged a whole new category of premium-priced, supermarket-sold peanut butters. It's also a growing export force. At the adjacent warehouse, which has been operating for a year, the hangar-like space is stacked with pallets, each holding 1000 of those distinctive red-starred Pic's jars.





Warehouse manager Craig Dawkins points out a section of pallets set aside for Australia, others earmarked for the fast-growing markets in China and the UK, where the product sells in Tesco. There's even a consignment for the United States, spiritual home of peanut butter. Of the 250,000 jars trucked out of here in an average month, a third are sent overseas, to markets that also include Singapore and Vietnam.

Wherever they go, customers tend to be enthusiastic. They write emails to Picot – letters, even – explaining just how much they love his product. “People have got 1kg jars in their emergency kits. I love that idea: ‘Bugger, the house has fallen down, but finally we can get into this 1kg jar of peanut butter.’”

It baffles him. “I’d never have believed people could get so excited about a food product. My dad was a grocer, involved with Foodtown, and I grew up thinking groceries were the most boring thing in the world.”

In fact, his father’s family founded Progressive Enterprises, now the second-largest grocery company in New Zealand. Picot, who was raised in Wellington, worked in supermarkets in his school holidays, but otherwise wanted nothing to do with it. After briefly studying architecture, the self-described black sheep of the family converted an old bread van into a mobile leather gear-making enterprise and hit the road, finishing up in Nelson.

In the early 70s, he took off overseas and “had a few adventures”, including sailing through the South Pacific. Back in New Zealand, he helped found a Coromandel



This page: Pic’s Peanut Butter in production. Opposite: Pic Picot with his labrador guide dog Fido outside the new Nelson factory.



commune – “that was a real insight into establishing things” – built a 45-foot boat, made furniture, launched a yacht charter business, set up a giftware venture and co-founded a sailing school in Nelson, among other things. “I’d get sick of things, and I never brought in the right people,” he says of his serial entrepreneurial efforts.

Meanwhile, his eyesight was deteriorating. At a young age, Picot’s mother developed macular degeneration, a condition that typically affects older people and involves a loss of central vision. Picot, although he still has peripheral vision, is legally blind. He read his last book 10 years ago and is accompanied most places by a black labrador guide dog. When he was named a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for his services to business last year, he took Fido to the ceremony at Government House.

Picot quotes a macular specialist, who always tells her younger patients they need to establish themselves in a position where

they don’t need to rely on others – to own the company, in other words. In Picot’s case, the catalyst was buying a truly awful jar of peanut butter, full of sugar.

“That’s what tipped me over, the lack of respect for the customers,” he says. “I like peanut butter. My mum used to make it, so I knew how. I pitched the whole business around making \$200 worth of peanut butter on a Friday morning, selling it in the afternoon and having cash for the weekend.”

So much for good intentions. “When we started nudging Sanitarium for sales, I thought, ‘This is insane!’” he says. “There have been a lot of ‘pinch-yourself’ moments, like sitting in the office and watching these huge [trucks] load up and drive off, or just being in the factory and seeing all these guys in paper hats and white coats and all the gleaming stainless-steel machines. I think, ‘I don’t know anything about this stuff!’ So it’s always surprising.”

The obvious explanation for Pic’s success is the integrity of the product, which is made

from nothing more than a little sea salt and Queensland hi-oleic nuts, that remain fresher longer. “When we started exporting and I began tasting other peanut butter from around the place, I tried to figure out the difference. It’s the Australian peanuts.”

But plenty of good food products never get beyond an artisan niche. Picot believes coming from Nelson, where the community has embraced the company, has been powerful. “If we were in Penrose (Auckland), we’d be nothing like we are.”

He also credits his belated embracing of the art of delegation – a product of his sight problems. “I think that if I hadn’t had this condition, then the business would just be me and maybe someone else fiddling around making peanut butter in a little hall. I’d be setting up the software, fixing all the machines – I love machinery – doing the graphics, and so on. But because I can’t,

I have been forced to get out of people’s way. It’s made a big difference.”


A while back, he handed over the day-to-day running of the company to Stuart Macintosh, to concentrate on strategy and “spreading the love” as a roving ambassador. “Stuart’s all the things I’m not. I have great ideas, but I’m all over the place.” (Among his current enthusiasms are driverless cars; he has a deposit on a Tesla, in expectation of the day when he can be autonomously driven between home and factory. He is also seriously investigating growing peanuts in Northland.)

There’s no great science to selling peanut butter, he says of his role as brand ambassador. “People get so tied up in their marketing theories, doing consumer research, holding focus groups. I know enthusiasm is catching. So many people out there tell me, ‘I’m your best promoter; I tell all my friends.’”

For that reason, the new complex has been

designed to accommodate public tours. Picot, who describes the factory as steampunk-inspired, has no concerns about betraying company secrets. “Our greatest strength is not any secret processes; it’s our customers – they drive everything. When people come out of that tour, we know they will be buying our peanut butter for the rest of their lives.”

There’s a hint of Wonka-like ambition, but the goal is not to take over the world. “We don’t want to be the biggest,” says Picot, who adds that he is far more interested in creating a workplace that people are eager to be a part of and a product and brand that consumers feel connected to.

“It’s such a neat thing to make and sell, and so healthy for people,” he says. “I sometimes picture people opening their cupboards, and there’s a jar of peanut butter in there, and everything’s okay.”  picspeanutbutter.com

Clockwise from right: Boxing up peanut butter; Picot enjoying a coffee break; jars of the popular spread.



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