Landline / By Tim Lee

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Entertainment

Flavorite operates the largest glasshouse operation in Australia. (ABC Landline)

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chief executive Mike Nichol said.

and cooling system is also re-circulated.

plant every week.

Australia

Landline: Tim Lee)

square metre.

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Under a vast expanse of glass panels, tomato vines up to 15 metres tall, laden with

ripening fruit, wind their way upward. A newly ripened bunch is picked from each

"We use about 20 per cent of the water that you would need per kilo for tomato

production, for example, in the field, and we're not degrading the soil," company

They thrive on a nutrient-rich solution that is circulated through kilometres of

Protected from the extremes of weather, these indoor, pampered plants are kept at

an optimal temperature to bear fruit almost all year round. The air from the heating

The company had a simple goal ... growing more flavoursome tomatoes "the way they used to taste". (ABC

This is food production on an industrial scale, making it the largest glasshouse

The facility at Warragul, east of Melbourne, can produce 80 kilograms of fruit per

Flavorite, the company behind it, was formed in 1993 by Mark Millis and Warren

He was unimpressed by the quality of commercially grown tomatoes and was

"The field guys were focusing on yield over taste, and so he said I'm going to make a

difference in that area and produce something that tastes good," said Mark Millis's

Nichol, two veterans of Melbourne's wholesale fruit and vegetable market.

operation in Australia and one of the most efficient.

It all began with a quest to grow a tastier tomato.

Mark Millis grew field tomatoes as a sideline.

determined to produce more flavoursome fruit.

son Chris, now the company's chief operating officer.

That's because there is no soil. The plants are grown hydroponically.

irrigation tubes that reuses 95 per cent of the water in the system.

The largest glasshouse operation in

Nation's largest glasshouse operation growing

vegetables hydroponically, still a family affair

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'amazing place', so why are so many tourist attractions closing here?

The business is still family owned and run by Chris Millis, Mike Nichol, and Tom Millis. (ABC Landline: Tim Lee) "One of our slogans on our packaging is 'the way tomatoes used to taste', and we believe that taste is very important," Mr Nichol said Back then, greenhouse-grown produce was a tiny segment of the market. It was more costly to grow than conventional field crops, and hydroponics, which was still in the early stages, had a high failure rate. Truss tomatoes that ripen on the vine to make them sweeter were almost unheard

retailers.

But Mark had the skill to grow them, and Warren had the expertise to market them. Produce all year round The pair could see the future; better quality fruit that could be produced indoors for most of the year, though an early obstacle was growing enough to supply major

"It took a bit of a punt to go and spend money on infrastructure to produce bigger volumes to get it to that critical mass where we had enough supply to be able to satisfy their needs," said Warren's son Mike Nichol, the company's chief executive.

when Landline first visited in 2003.



"We diversified into capsicums, cucumbers and eggplant," said Mr Nichol.

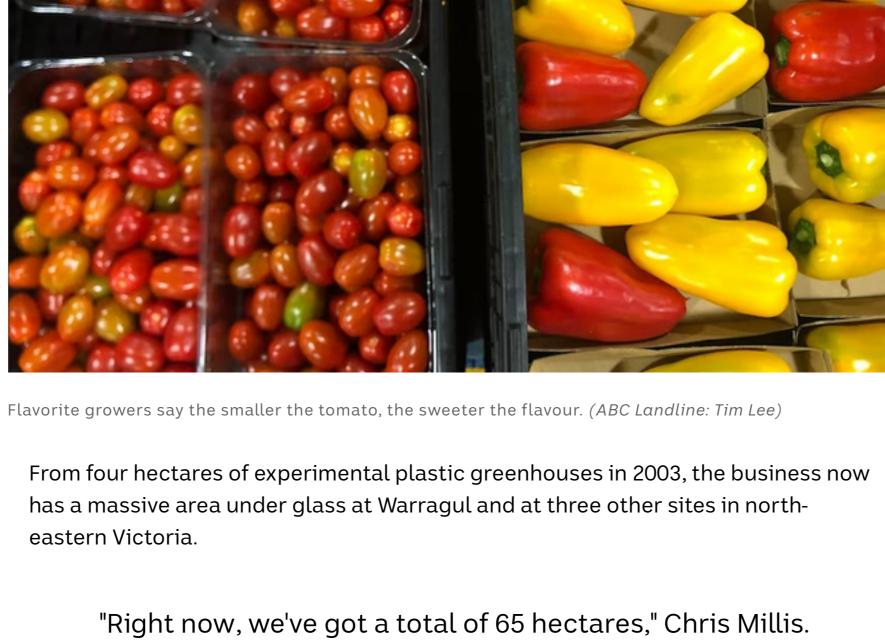
But the biggest trend is for small, bite-sized fruit and vegetable varieties,

"The snacking section of the market is huge, the amount of varieties, different

shapes and sizes and colours and things like that," said Grant Nichol, who oversees

increasingly popular for salads, snacks and lunch-box fillers.

the company's produce at the Melbourne Fresh Market.



The business now employs a thousand people in its glasshouses, packing sheds and offices. Family operation Peak growing season is fast approaching, and further expansion will mean the

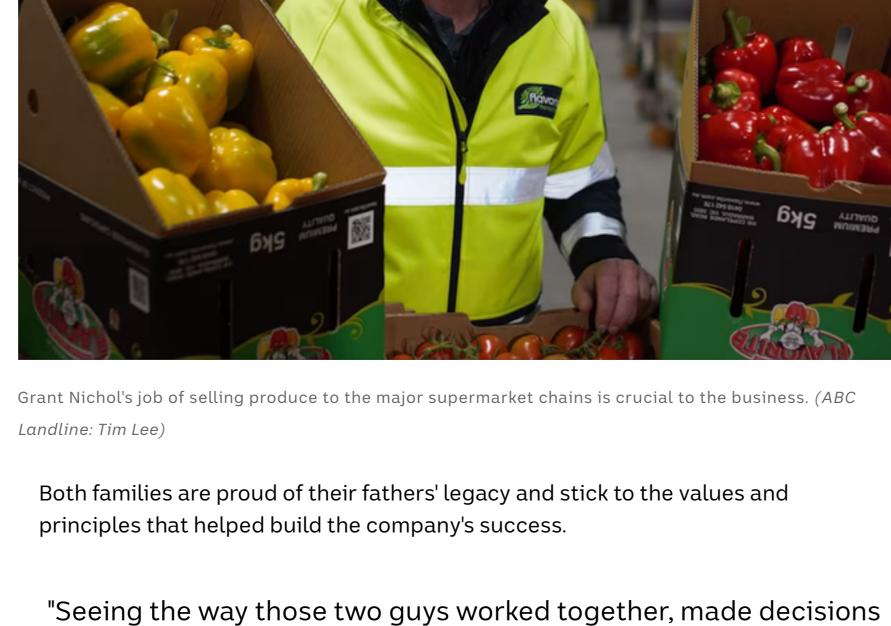
There are plans to expand to 100 hectares within five years, much of it geared

towards the smaller varieties, such as cherry and mini-Roma tomatoes.

company needs another 380 workers in the coming weeks.

Despite the rapid growth, the business is still family-owned and run. Second and third generations are now part of the operation. Sadly, neither founder lived to see the business achieve its most recent

spectacular success. Warren Nichol died in 2008, and Mark Millis in 2019.



together, sort of really helped us," said Chris Millis. "Innovation, sustainability, and customer focus, so trying to really build something

that's there long term and for generations to come."

"People are looking for great tasting food, and that's what we think we can provide. From big tomatoes all the way down to little tomatoes," said Mike Nicol. "There's a lot more to come." Watch this story on ABC TV's Landline at 12:30pm on Sunday, or on ABC iview.

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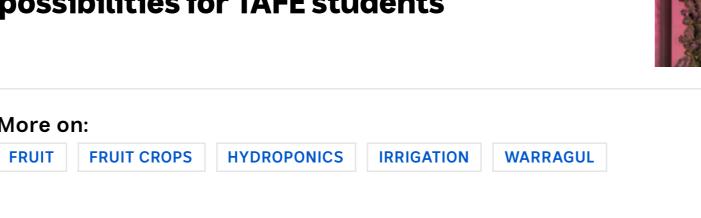
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