

The good oil

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THE has one of Australia's most famous food names and grew up surrounded by the extraordinary success of his father and uncles. But for third-generation food entrepreneur Mark Kailis a silver spoon was not part of his birthright. In fact, for the first 18 months of his working life, Kailis cleaned grease traps and scrubbed rotisserie ovens at the Red Rooster empire founded by his father, Peter. He spent 80 hours a week in the lowliest jobs before he gained a toehold in management.

At night he'd come home spattered with grease collected during the day. "I'd be walking by and someone would be shaking the chips and suddenly, Whack! You'd have the pattern from the deep-fryer mesh on your chest. That used to happen all the time."

He admits it was tough. But 27 years later and with his Perth-based company Kailis Organic on track to become the world's biggest organic olive oil producer, Kailis wouldn't change a thing. And he believes the inauspicious start was pivotal to his success.

"No one gets an easy ride in. There are those at the moment who would like an easy ride and they're trying their hardest to see if they can do it within the family - a generational thing. But they're fast learning that if they don't stand on their own two feet, they're on their own."

Kailis believes that a strict work ethos is the reason the family has been so successful. Every member is motivated to achieve. "You grow up in an environment where you are told that you're wanted in the family business, but also that you have to bring something to it. You can't just be there."

His father and a trio of uncles - Theo, Victor and the late Michael Kailis - became legendary figures in Western Australia after they built up extremely successful and disparate empires. Mark Kailis plans to do the same.

While his uncles focused on seafood - from lobsters, pearls, packaged meals and frozen food to a famous Fremantle fish market, restaurants and even boats - his father was the odd man out with cardboard boxes, Red Rooster and wine.

Mark Kailis chose olives, but says there was little choice because he gets horrendously seasick. That made the seafood business less than ideal. This realisation came early, after Kailis

went out on a crayfishing trawler and paid a heavy price. "They were the worst days of my life," he groans loudly, looking queasy just thinking about it. "It's making my mouth water. I can't talk about it."

Kailis is quick to laugh at himself, exuding all the warmth and passion of his Greek-Italian heritage. He roars with laughter when recounting the exploits of his "eclectic" wife and children, who recently acquired an "Italian truffle dog", causing havoc in the household.

He labels his wife Natalie "unusual" and grins every time he mentions her. "Our dinner sets aren't the same plates; we don't have the same sets of knives and forks. Everything is eclectic. And, of course, we've had a daughter [Lavinia, aged 11] who just craves order." Their son, Vlas, eight, and baby Valentina, two, complete the nuclear family tree.

His extended family is huge; a family cookbook lists a flock of uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and cousins, many of whom are also in family businesses.

As Kailis Organic gears up for a big increase in oil production, Mark exudes an almost zealous fervour for "safe, clean organic foods". At 45, he's a man on a mission, warning of cancers linked to agricultural chemicals and the need for transparency. Prospects in organic foods will turn the food industry on its head, he says. Even his clothes are organic.

His passion for organic foods has been fermenting for well over a decade but it is only now crystallising as thousands more olive trees - planted over years, first by the family and then with a sponsor - finally mature. "The problem in agriculture is that everything takes a long time, particularly with horticulture. So we'll have to wait virtually till 2011 for some fairly significant harvests. We had a good harvest this year and next year it will double, from 3 million kilos of olive fruit to nearly 5.5 million kilos.

"We spotted a trend in the food industry, which is organic, and we went out and planted groves. We then attracted a sponsor that assisted us in taking these to an industrial size, and we are in a position right now where the marketplace is beginning to double in size. Our volumes as they come through the farms are matched by the growing awareness and education of the marketplace."

Most of the olive trees tapped by his company were part of a virtual land bank owned by the blue gum and agriculture investment company Great Southern, which collapsed last year. The drama has reportedly had little impact on Kailis, who has opted to buy the olive groves from the liquidator to avoid any disruption.

And his plans don't end there. The next step is to revolutionise the industry through a concept called "traceability", which would allow consumers to call a phone number in order to find out which farmer grew the olives in their Kailis oil. "Although it's not here yet and I don't have that ability right now, we have the IT platform for it



Organic food entrepreneur Mark Kailis may be branching out, but he knows the value of his roots.

ready to go for when we launch into the next phase of the company, which is in about 18 months.

"This is a consumer-led revolution. We are trying to create transparency, basically all the way back to the farm, so that the consumer reaching for the supermarket shelf is reaching for the farmer as well."

HE says consumers are craving such contact and the ability to trust their food after a number of scares. "You know what it's like. To buy soy milk, you stand there for half an hour reading the back of the package until you go 'stuff it' and throw it into the trolley. Every time I shop at Woolies or Coles I do it once and then I give up. I end up walking out in frustration with my eco-bags and having to wait till the organic markets open on Sunday."

A Greek-Italian kid who used his fists to get through school, he grew up a self-proclaimed punk with "weird" hair (at one stage dyed cherry red) and ripped jeans and listening to The Clash. Yet Kailis somehow survived Perth's staid Scotch College. But he clearly didn't enjoy it. "I was still a Greek at school and I had to fight. We have a fighting ethic. People seem to forget now what it was like growing up as a Greek or an Italian even 25 years ago, 35 years ago. It was tough. I look at the Asian kids today and have a lot of sympathy for them because I know what they're going through."

Kailis says he is the least-educated person in his business, the only one without a degree. Yet he doesn't seem to mind. He is surrounded by "extraordinary people" with "serious science degrees" who keep everything on track.

And then there's the family. "I would sit down with my father once a day and tell him what's going on and I have the benefit of an 83-year-old brain that has been through all this before - a great source of inspiration but also a library on how to get from A to B. We wax lyrical about this on a daily basis, as I do with the rest of the team. It's an amalgam of ideas.

"My father and his brothers, my family, they have the most impeccable work ethic. Dad's 83 and I was in here at 5am and he was in at 6.45am."

His father regularly cooks lunch for the staff in a huge kitchen at the office. Often they are joined by Uncle Theo, whom Kailis credits as another shining light. "I have a lot of old heads around me. My father is a very shrewd busi-

nessman ... then there's my brother George ... and Theo, who started selling lobsters when they were 50 cents a hessian sack and who created the lobster industry up north.

"I have all that eclectic intelligence around me. So it's not me, I haven't done this. It's the group of people that I have around me who are responsible for the dynamic that I operate in."

Kailis admits he has been fortunate in life. He says he personally hasn't had to overcome any serious hardships - although the ever-present smile dims briefly as he thinks again.

"My darling Uncle Theo, who was a big inspiration in creating this business, unfortunately has dementia and it's very sad. Dementia awareness is something we are all very much involved in."

He is determined that his children's well-being won't be sabotaged by wealth and privilege. Two years ago he moved the family from affluent City Beach to the Perth Hills in order to ensure they stayed real. "We wanted to live in an area where the kids could have a stick and a bit of string and a rock, go horse-riding and have a dog. You see some people and they just get carried away with their own name sometimes - but the quality has to go in before the name goes on."

Kailis and his father remain extremely close and share the same rebel streak, although the son is the first to have shone the spotlight on a famous family whose members have always been intensely private and rarely give media interviews.

"Dad's the eldest Kailis. He married an Italian, which was a no-no [back then] because his father and grandfather had been thrown into an Italian prisoner-of-war camp just before World War I. He pretty much broke every rule in the book.

"Dad made it his business to prove himself beyond what he had created. He went into the packaging business and he revolutionised the way that cardboard boxes and such are made. [The late Visy Industries chief Richard] Pratt and my father were head-to-head combatants in the early days. Pratt even offered Dad a job, [but] Dad chose to stick with his five Jewish partners. His story is phenomenal, and the type of person he is, you'd love him."

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