

# Crunch time

Kiwi company Rokit Global has big plans for its little apples, which have been taking off in markets all over the world.

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TALK ABOUT THE one that nearly got away. When, several years ago, Plant & Food Research unveiled a new variety of apple that was sweet, red and crisp, but not much bigger than a golf ball, none of the major players wanted to know. With Asian markets in particular demanding larger and larger apples, it looked like a solution in search of a problem.

Then Hawke's Bay horticulture figure Phil Alison bought the global rights and in 2013 sent the new variety out into the world. Labelled Rokit and aimed at the healthy snack market, the miniature fruit made a mighty splash. Alison sold his shareholding in 2017, but Rokit Global, as the company

was renamed, marches on. The variety is grown here and under licence in six European countries, North America and Australia, and is sold in 22 countries. There's good growth in both consumer demand and the scale of plantings.

"Timing is everything," explains CEO Austin Mortimer, an expat Irishman who arrived at the company in 2015 after a stint heading Fastway Couriers. "The big global trend that maybe the major players missed was towards snacking, and within that, towards healthy snacking. Rokit apples resonated with that body of people snacking on the go and conscious of their health."

It helped that Rokit was able to draw on

plenty of industry know-how, including Alison's relationships with Asian fruit importers, and various directors' experience in the kiwifruit business, including the development of the Zespri brand. China now accounts for almost half of sales, with the rest split between other parts of Asia, Europe, North America and Australia.

The Havelock North-based exporter operates a two-pronged strategy. In New Zealand, it manages the orchards, grows the fruit, packs it and handles all sales and marketing. Overseas, the global rights allow for a different approach. "We wouldn't have had the expertise to commercialise it in the northern hemisphere," says Mortimer.



“With our North American and European growers, we develop the sales and marketing plan and do all the brand positioning, but they do the growing and the packing and pay us a royalty on sales.”

It makes for a subtly different-tasting apple, depending on where you’re eating it. Recently, Mortimer visited an orchard in Kent, England. “It was terrific – not quite as sweet as we grow here, but for that domestic market it was perfect.”

The Rockit’s sweetness, size, almost-magenta colour and what Mortimer calls a “perfect blend of pressure and crunchiness”, are all appealing to the Asian market. “We’re also focused on quality,” he says, noting that the company’s ratio of fruit exported to crop grown is well below the industry average. “We’re in a premium space, and don’t want to disappoint our customers.”

Cracking the Chinese market has been helped by strong relationships. Rockit Global is working with major fruit importer Joy Wing Mau as well as retailer Pagoda, which has thousands of premium stores in Chinese high streets. “They have a view to getting to 10,000 shops by 2020, or something like that – the numbers in China are always extraordinary.”



This page: The Rockit orchard and packing operation in Hawke’s Bay. Jethro Ragoda picks apples. Opposite: Rockit Global CEO Austin Mortimer.



The company is chasing some of that growth. Last year, it partnered with Primary Collaboration New Zealand, which represents 13 New Zealand brands and has a team of 22 based in China. It's early days, but Mortimer expects to reap "huge benefits".

Beyond China, Rokit Global has identified a couple of demographic markets. One is lunch boxes. "Kids hate large apples in their lunches because they take too long to eat in a 30-minute break, and parents hate them because they come back half-eaten. That's a huge demographic, and a pain point everywhere - in Europe, the US, Asia," says Mortimer.

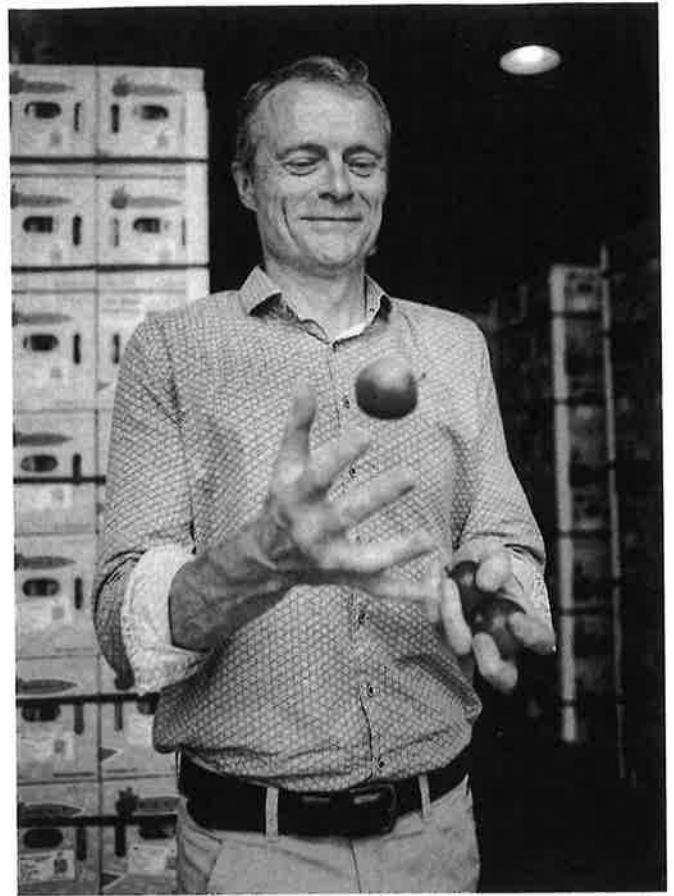
"There's also a massive demographic of people who live alone in Japan who are middle-aged or older, and single. The apples in Japan are huge, and it doesn't work for them. Rokit is perfect, because it's effectively a single serving."

Simultaneously, the company is pushing to supply apples to key markets 12 months of the year. "If we want to present Rokit as a healthy snack, we can't say to our customers that it won't be available for six months. We have to say, 'Make it part of your daily diet.'"

The first part of the strategy is to plant more trees in New Zealand. "We have 200ha planted, and strong demand gives us the confidence to continue planting until we reach at least 600ha for supply into our Asian markets."

The second part involves encouraging northern hemisphere growers to plant more apples, so gaps can be plugged. After the last New Zealand crop sold out, for example, the company worked with northern hemisphere growers to get their fruit into Asian markets. For the first time, Rokit apples were on the shelves year-round.

And when the American and European markets gain further traction, Mortimer envisages New Zealand will be able to supply them with fruit in their off-season. "So Rokit apples will be on shelves globally for 12 months of the year." ●  
[rockitapple.com](http://rockitapple.com)



At Rokit's mission control, clockwise from top left: Celeste Gillies drives the tractor; Austin Mortimer; harvest time; Hamish Potts in the pack house.



