



Marvin Amaro

- ▶ **Pioneer grower of tomatoes, rockmelons, lettuce seed and maize in the Murrumbidgee Valley**
- ▶ **Innovator in irrigation techniques**
- ▶ **Innovator in mechanisation**
- ▶ **Inaugural recipient of the IREC Lifetime Achievement Award**



Just before this magazine went to print, we received the sad news that Marvin Amaro passed away. The following article was completed some weeks earlier and is published as prepared with the blessing of the Amaro family.

Too big and too hard are probably words Marvin Amaro has never uttered. In 1964, Marvin and his wife Helen, and eight children aged between 16 and 2 arrived from California to take on the "last frontier" of agriculture in Australia. Moving a young family overseas, is probably a lifetime's experience for most.

Marvin established a tomato growing business in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area and 40 years later the family are still the Riverina's largest tomato grower. Rockmelons are another enterprise established by the family, and today the Amaros are among Australia's largest rockmelon producers.

Scale of production is not the Amaros' only claim to fame. Finding ways to make production more efficient through mechanisation and irrigation techniques has also been a key feature of the Amaro farming systems, keeping the family at the forefront of their industry.

Mrs Amaro described all their business ventures as being planned for the "long haul", which is testified by the fact they operate the business today in conjunction with three sons, Gary, Duane and Randy. At various intervals grandchildren are also involved in the business.

The successes of the Amaro family business, and their contribution and influence on the MIA, have been recognised by IREC, with Marvin Amaro receiving IREC's inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award.

Whitton farmer Richard Stott, who was instrumental in initiating the award, believes Marvin Amaro is a great example of the quiet achievers who have helped build the success of the MIA.

"Marvin is a farmer who initiated change in large-area vegetable, seed and maize production. He became a benchmark for the rest of us to work towards. His ideas with

machinery were simple, clever and revolutionised many aspects of farming. All this was done in a quiet unheralded fashion," said Richard.

"Growing tomatoes and vegetables is a test of anyone's character. Over the years Marvin has shown himself to be an astute farmer, generously and readily sharing his experience with all. It has been a privilege to work with Marvin and his family over the past six years. As an aspiring young farmer I looked up to Marvin and little did I dream I would work in partnership with him one day, or of the scale of that partnership."

Richard has been growing tomatoes in partnership with Marvin and his sons, and in the 2000–01 season they were the biggest tomato producing operation in Australia.

Pioneer of large-scale tomato production

Marvin came to Australia as a partner of the company McCarthy Brothers. The company, comprising Marvin and three McCarthy brothers, was keen to grow cotton, as the partners had in the USA. They were attracted to the Murrumbidgee Valley and the opportunities promised by the development of the Snowy Mountains Scheme. Cotton proved largely unsuccessful in the Murrumbidgee Valley but Marvin explored other opportunities and stayed on to head up the Australian interests of the company.

Marvin began investigating opportunities for tomatoes, and at the time Letona cannery at Leeton was rebuilding its business after massive fruit tree losses from the wet winter of 1956. Letona welcomed the opportunity for diversification and fruit from Marvin's 220 acre crop trebled the cannery's intake of tomatoes. At that stage the largest crop in the MIA was 15 acres.

Marvin's first tomato crop was grown on Farm 52, Hanwood. The family continues to grow tomatoes at Whitton, Hillston and Warburn, and have delivered to a range of processors over the years. Production rates have increased from 100 tonnes per day in the 1960s to currently, 1700 tonnes per day.



Innovation is a hallmark of Marvin's tomato production enterprise. Large scale production raised immediate problems of securing adequate labour for planting and harvest. In 1965, hand planting some 530 seedlings per acre over 220 acres was not a practical option. Marvin worked with a local engineering company to build a planting machine. The machine was designed to seat six planters, and in one operation plant the seedling, water, fertilise and apply insecticide. A first for Australia, the six-row machine was drawn behind a high axle row crop tractor and covered 12 to 13 acres in an eight-hour working day.

As Marvin's large-scale tomato crops thrived, labour for harvest was the next hurdle to overcome. A mechanical harvester was imported from the USA, however it was kept on standby as Roma tomatoes were not suited to mechanical harvesting. With the assistance of the Commonwealth Employment Service, up to 160 pickers were contracted at the height of the 1966 harvest. An on-site caravan park was built, complete with showers, laundry and toilet facilities, to overcome accommodation shortages in Griffith. In 1967, 240 pickers were signed up for harvest with most coming from Alice Springs.

After two harvests managing large workforces (not to mention 1731 group certificates that had to be written out), Marvin imported a second mechanical harvester to overcome local labour shortages and to better manage his large area of tomato production. The processing tomato industry in Australia moved to total mechanical harvesting in the early 1980s.

The Amaros' first tomato crops were furrow irrigated using siphons to run water down each furrow. Tomato crops are now watered using drip irrigation on light soils and furrow irrigation on heavy soils.

Rockmelons

In the 1970s, Marvin started producing rockmelons as a rotation crop with tomatoes. For more than three decades now, the family business Amaland Agco has been the largest melon grower in the Riverina, and among the largest rockmelon growers in Australia. Amaland melons are a highly respected brand in major Australian markets, and have been sought for export, currently to Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

Innovation has been a driver of the Amaros' rockmelon enterprise. For many years the Amaros grew furrow irrigated melons on black plastic mulch. In 1997, in collaboration with NSW Agriculture, the family experimented with drip irrigation on Randy's farm at Whitton on a one hectare plot. The following year, they grew 122 hectares at Whitton under drip irrigation, and subsequently converted their entire 260 hectare rockmelon and seedless watermelon crop to drip.

Improved irrigation management led to the adoption of soil moisture monitoring on the drip irrigated blocks using EnviroSCAN technology, and later the Adcon system.

In 1998, rockmelon harvest was streamlined with the introduction of a machine that could carry pickers, seated or lying down over the field. Designed by Marvin and Amaland engineer, John Vian, the machine carries 18 pickers, under shade and is self-propelled. Pickers are able to comfortably lift ripe fruit and place it on a conveyor. As a result of introducing the machine, Marvin found it much easier to sign up workers for harvest.

Diversification

Marvin was accustomed to diversification right from the start, having produced potatoes, cotton, lucerne, grapes and onions in his homeland Fresno, California. In Australia, diversification not only meant growing a wide range of crops, but also operating properties away from the Griffith-Leeton area.

Marvin developed large areas of irrigation and pioneered large scale maize farming techniques at Ravensworth, west of Hay. The family owned the property from 1970 to 1987 and grew 5000 acres of maize in 1970, the first large scale maize crop in the Murrumbidgee Valley. They also produced seed crops of lettuce, maize, cucurbits, sunflower and sorghum at Ravensworth. Cattle were also a major enterprise, with production levels at 20,000 head.

Through his association with McCarthy Brothers, Marvin became involved with cattle production in the Queensland gulf country. In a characteristic drive for efficiency, the business introduced helicopter mustering to the industry. The company ran 45,000 head of cattle. Throughout the 1980s



Figure 1 Tomato harvest in 1967 using the first mechanical



Figure 2 Melon picking was streamlined in 1998 with a carrier



Marvin also owned 908 square miles of cattle country at Chillagoe, in Queensland. All the time, managing the family's operations in the Riverina with his sons.

Expansion of a family business

A striking attribute of the Amaro family business is its inclusion of family members. All four Amaro sons have been involved in the business. The eldest, also called Marvin, managed *Ravensworth* during the 1970s. Sadly, he died in an accident at the property. Gary, Duane and Randy are involved with the business today, each taking responsibility for certain parts of Amaland operations.

Recent years have seen a third generation of the family in the business. Grandson Daniel Walsh, originally from Bega, has worked with Amaland for three years, while studying horticulture at the same time. Over the last two years, grandsons Marcus and Damien Bristol from Perth, also worked in the business but they have now returned to Perth to resume university studies or take up other careers. Marvin believes it was a great opportunity for his grandchildren, who have grown up away from the land, to be part of the family business, and to see life and business from an agricultural production perspective. There are another 25 Amaro grandchildren - whether or not they choose to do a "sabbatical" in the family business remains to be seen.

Innovation, diversification and expanding the boundaries continue to be characteristic of the Amaro approach to farming.

During the 1990s the family acquired *Pinevale* at Warburn for the production of processing tomatoes and melons. *Pinevale* is undulating red mallee soil country, and not commonly regarded as ideal for melons. However, the Amaro boys proved otherwise under drip irrigation and black plastic mulch. Along with melon and tomato rotations being established, Randy rehabilitated two large blocks of white peaches at *Pinevale*, and established both citrus and grape plantings.

A recent move to liquid fertilisers through the fertigation system at *Pinevale* has streamlined the agronomy of the crop management. Andrew Creek joined Amaland in 1999, and worked with the family for four seasons, fine-tuning the irrigation management and introducing regular sap analysis of all crops to better manage nutrient applications.

For three seasons from 1999–2002, Gary and Andrew Creek managed 120 hectares of processing tomatoes north of Hillston. The whole crop was grown on drip irrigation with average yields over three years of more than 100 tonnes/hectare. This is considered a great achievement given the isolation of the property, the earliness of the crop, and the fact that tomatoes were grown three years on the same ground.

From 1998 Duane worked closely with Richard Stott at Whitton growing processing tomatoes at Kooba Station. Together they ran an operation with an output of over 25,000 tonnes per year of processing tomatoes for paste production for Echuca based company, Cedenco.

Leading by example

Marvin's achievements have been significant in terms of personal achievement, business success and contribution to the industry.

Field officers with Letona Cannery Don Melville and Bob Williams, recall the influence that Marvin had on the tomato industry.

"Marvin's innovative approach to the possibilities of large scale operations was a catalyst for many other farmers in the region to also consider bigger production scales," Don said.

"On a personal level, Marvin always had a positive outlook and his ventures were well thought out and well planned. He kept up with advances in technology and was never afraid of being innovative."

The Amaro family have established a reputation for reliability in whatever crop they grow, and have kept at the forefront of technology. Over the years they have been willing to share their experience and knowledge with others. As the family patriarch, Marvin has shaped the culture and reputation of the business and remains an active participant in planning farming and marketing strategies.

A significant and quiet achiever, Marvin's Lifetime Achievement Award is highly deserved. 🌞

This article has been compiled by the Editor and Mark Hickey, NSW Agriculture; with thanks to Marvin, Mrs Amaro and Sharon Bristol for first hand information.



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