

SPINY HARVEST

An innovative fishing business in south-eastern Australia combines a commercial harvest with ecological rehabilitation.

STORY + PHOTOS MANDY McKEESICK



Deckhand Andrew Curtis, at left, and diver Keith Browne with a boatload of purple urchins off the coast of Eden, NSW. OPPOSITE: A purple sea urchin cracked open to show the roe.

It isn't for the landlubber. Squeezed into a narrow marine gutter, with a cunjevoi-encrusted shoreline reaching for her bow and a breaking wave threatening her stern, sea urchin boat *Soul Surchin* is plying her trade. As a stockman will sit astride a fractious mare, so deckhand Andrew Curtis rides the swell aboard this 6-metre fibreglass craft, one eye on the sea as it rolls towards him, another on the twin 115-horsepower (85 kilowatt) motors, and all the while watching the boil of bubbles that marks the diver below.

Andrew and diver Keith Browne are proprietors of South Coast Sea Urchins, an innovative business that takes roe from spiny urchins and delivers it to discerning palates across the country. Both men originally hail from New Zealand and have a long history in the Australian fishing industry, working in the abalone game before seeing an opportunity to market sea urchins. Their business on the south coast of New South Wales employs three teams of divers and 25 workers at the Pambula factory.

Today, the pair is working the coastline south of Eden and, with Keith halfway through his six-hour diving day, Andrew is flat out tending the boat and

packing urchins. The sinuous yellow hose winding across the water, which supplies air to the diver, comes perilously close to entanglement in the propellers – “you're not a deckie until you've cut the hose,” Andrew quips – but he flips it nonchalantly out of harm's way before glaring at the spluttering air compressor that has just been swamped by a wave.

Underwater, Keith levers the sea urchins from their rocky substrate and places them into a net bag. Once the bag is full, he inflates a parachute and sends 30 kilograms of urchins rocketing to the surface for Andrew to collect. “From January to June we work here and in northern Victoria, harvesting the purple urchins,” Andrew says. “Warm water and summer light means they are feeding well and producing good roe, which has a strong, bitey taste – something like a vintage cheese. Then from July to November we move to Port Phillip in Melbourne to harvest the white urchins. They have a more subtle flavour and are favoured by restaurants. You could say they are the best quality urchins in Australia.”

The day's catch totals 600kg and processing begins at the factory mere hours after *Soul Surchin* docks. The factory, which opened in 2005, can process 50 tonnes



Keith Browne with a tub of West Island Kina and a purple sea urchin. OPPOSITE: Premium Ozi Uni ready for market.

of urchins a year but plans are in place to double this in the future. “The abalone industry saw the sea urchin as a pest because it denudes the ocean floor, but in New Zealand and overseas the roe is considered a delicacy,” Keith says of the indulgence also known as kina, uni and ricci di mare. So revered is the dish that *New York Times* food critic Ruth Reichl once described it as “the sexiest seafood – thorny, fragrant and complex”.

The spiny carapace of the sea urchin is cracked to reveal five segments of golden yellow roe, which are removed and cleaned of debris by industrious hands. The Maori people have a strong cultural preference for the roe packed in tubs of brine and, in a nod to their shared heritage, Andrew and Keith have named one of their most popular products West Island Kina. Their high-end product, known as Ozi Uni and long sought after by the Japanese, is dry packed in individual pieces and is gaining a strong following in top Australian restaurants.

South Coast Sea Urchins has seen its share of ups and downs. Storms destroy urchin stocks, roe may be depleted

or of poor quality, and breaking into new markets and educating Australian tastebuds have all been challenges. “I think we worked for free the first eight years,” Keith says. While there may be a hard-won commercial advantage to harvesting sea urchins there is also an ecological one. “Back in the 1950s to 1970s the crayfish industry in Australia was astronomical, but when you take one species out of the environment something has to fill its gap,” Keith says. “Once the crays were gone, the abalone moved in and their numbers increased, then the commercial abalone divers moved in, then came the urchins. But when we take the urchins out, habitat comes back, because they are the problem. They destroy a habitat, eating it down.”

Keith’s absorption in this facet of his work is mesmerising. Combining science and observation, he speaks passionately of the rehabilitation of reefs, likening the process to the regeneration of grasslands, as micro-algae and then seaweeds return. “After 10 years as an abalone diver I thought I’d better give something back to the resource, then once you start rebuilding ecologies you get hooked on it and it takes over. We can now see the results of our work on Google Earth, where we have taken a barren landscape and turned it into a pasture – it drives you to keep going.”

