

# WATER YOU'RE WAITING FOR



(L-R) Richard Betham (Operations Manager), Phil Roberts (General Manager) and Sean Hellesoe (Quality Assurance Manager)



## NEED TO KNOW

- ▲ South Pacific Water Co. is certified to Australia and New Zealand Bottle Water Institute requirements and is awaiting certification from the US
- ▲ Australian company Moon design were responsible for the branding and bottle design
- ▲ Fiji Water became the number one bottled water in the US through clever product placement on television and films. Hollywood actors and famous singers now drink their product.
- ▲ The Grey family rose to prominence as the name behind the world-famous Aggie Grey hotel group, which has developed a global reputation for its Samoan-style hospitality.



Samoa has entered the USD\$8 billion global bottled water industry with South Pacific Water Co. aiming to emulate the success of Fiji Water in the United States. Prior to the official launch in August, PETER REES was given a tour of the company's AUD\$8 million state-of-the-art plant in Faleolo by company director Fred Grey

If it's good for the world, it's good for Samoa. That's the philosophy behind South Pacific Water Co., Samoa's first bottled artesian water export and the second product from the South Pacific to truly enter the global market, after Fiji Water.

Its brainchild is company director Fred Grey of the famous hotel chain started nearly 70 years ago by his grandmother Aggie Grey.

"The idea came to me about four years ago," he says. "I'd seen some of the figures and articles about bottled water, a USD\$8 billion industry worldwide growing at 20 per cent per annum. Then I read up on the success of Fiji water in the United States. I said that if Fiji can do it, there's no reason why Samoa can't."

Grey took the concept and spent a year working with a New Zealand geological firm looking for a suitable area with a lot of water. That oasis happened to be conveniently located near the Faleolo International Airport.

"It was perfect, in the middle of untouched rainforest," Grey explains, "7000 acres of uninhabited land. Millions and millions of gallons of pure water, filtered over hundreds of years through the volcanic rock, was just sitting there."

After consultations with government,

Grey was able to lease 50 acres with the government reserving an additional 1000 acres surrounding the plant "so there would be no contamination of the site".

In September 2007 New Zealand company Fletcher Construction began building the plant. Equipment and machines came in from Japan, Taiwan, Australia and Germany. By March 2008, the plant was operational.

Grey likes to use the term state-of-the-art to describe the spanking new AUD\$8 million dollar plant, located just minutes away from his family-owned Aggie Grey's Lagoon Beach Resort & Spa. The plant churns out 12,000 bottles per hour.

We met at his resort on a mild, sunny Monday afternoon, the heat not too overbearing. He took me for a drive up to the plant, his vehicle cruising along the main road before veering right into a side road which looks recently laid. After a gradual uphill climb which lasts a few minutes, with rainforest views on either side, we arrive at a clearing. Fenced off and paved all around, there the huge plant sat, like the eighth wonder of the world, right on top of the country's largest water basin.

I sign in at reception.

"You're our first visitor today," says the

receptionist with a smile.

Inside, the newness of everything strikes you immediately from the gleam and shine of the machinery, to the spotless walls and floors.

As Grey dishes out the specs and features of the plant, it's hard to comprehend something that appears so cutting edge sitting in the middle of a Samoan rainforest.

At the official launch in August Samoa Prime Minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, admitted he was a sceptic when the proposal first came to him four years ago. Now he's a believer.

As we stroll down a hallway, we make a quick detour to the main offices. Grey introduces his three wise men responsible for running the plant; Phil Roberts (General Manager), Richard Betham (Operations Manager) and Sean Hellesoe (Quality Assurance Manager).

Continuing on, we pass a room that is unmistakably the laboratory. More hallways and doors later, and we enter the main warehouse where the line machines and water storage units are housed. What hits me is the surprisingly low number of staff for a place so enormous.

"The plant is fully automated. The bulk of our staff of 30 are local and mostly engineers and laboratory technicians," Grey points out,

emphasising the water is bottled at the source.

"We manufacture our own bottles. The labels come from New Zealand, the cartons from Fiji, the caps from Indonesia, and the resin to make the bottles comes from Thailand.

"It is important to remember that the water is not purified (tap) water; it is pure artesian water and laboratory tested. The only time you touch the bottle is when you unscrew the cap."

In terms of purity, South Pacific Water can claim an advantage over Fiji Water because of the absence of imported pesticides and chemicals as Samoa doesn't have a mass agricultural base like Fiji.

Hancocks) and Australia it will be available in all supermarkets, bars, restaurants, cafes, liquor outlets and petrol stations. The much larger markets of the US, Europe and Asia are Grey's ultimate aim, boosted by the fact that South Pacific Water is now the premier water for the Virgin Blue fleet. Aggie Grey's was already in a joint venture partnership with the Samoan government and Virgin Blue which spawned the national airline Polynesian Blue.

"Virgin Blue CEO Brad Godfrey loved the concept," shares Grey. "I said to him you can serve Coca-Cola water on your aircraft, but you've got the chance to help the little guy here."

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## SPREADING THE MARKET

Grey is aware of the economic impact to Samoa if the venture proves successful.

"There's minimal export going out of Samoa now because of the downturn in fish, copra and the taro blight," he says. "There's absolutely no export that's doing more than 10 containers a month. Fiji Water alone exports 1000 containers a month just to the US.

"We're targeting 100 containers in the first five years, per annum. If we can do 100 containers a month, I'd be very happy."

With South Pacific Water Co. already securing distribution rights in New Zealand (through

