
MIDLANDS NUTRITIONAL OIL



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Keen to offer its farmer-growers new options coupled with producing more than just seed crops, a diverse Ashburton company set up its own oil seed extraction plant and now sells its natural cold pressed nutritional oils around the globe.

It started with a single press in a rented portacom fifteen years ago, but today Midlands Nutritional Oils is one of the market leaders supplying high quality bulk speciality oils to the global food, skincare and health markets, as well as under its own brands new hemisphere™ and omeganz™.

“The business today is very different to how it started out back then,” explains Midlands Nutritional Oils managing director and Midlands Seed director, Andrew Davidson. Originally named Oil Seed Extraction Limited, it started in 2002 on the back of the boom and subsequent bust of the local evening primrose seed market almost overnight when production shifted to China, which had an impact on local farmers in the late 1990s. “We didn’t want to see something like that happen again. We wanted to control our own destiny and create new markets for our arable growers and oil extraction seemed like a good vehicle to achieve that.”

Its move coincided with the relaxation in laws to allow hemp to be grown commercially. Midlands gained some of the earliest licences for its production in the 2001/2002 growing season. Until 2001 it was illegal to grow hemp (*cannabis sativa L*) in New Zealand, but worldwide awareness was on the rise of its health-giving properties as a super source of essential fatty acids (EFAs) omega 3 and omega 6, and containing 5 per cent gamma linolenic acid (GLA). EFAs are important for the proper functioning of the immune system, brain health, wound healing and for insulating nerves while GLA has a strong anti-inflammatory effect.

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ABOVE TOP A flax (linseed) crop in full flower.
 ABOVE Plant manager Barry Snell at work in the factory.
 OPPOSITE Midlands Nutritional Oils sales and marketing manager, Nigel Hosking in a paddock of flax just prior to harvest.



ABOVE (clockwise from left) Midlands is one of the country's few producers of hemp seed oil ; checking oil after extraction; and, seed cake ready for human applications or animal nutrition.

Although new and novel at the time, Andrew says it quickly identified immediate opportunities in processing flax seed oil, otherwise known as linseed, and hemp oil. “It was very cottagey to begin with. There was just Barry (Snell, our plant manager) and me. When we built the current building on Walnut Avenue in 2004 we thought it was way too big, and that we’d need to lease half of it out. We even had a jet boat in there at the beginning.”

Business has grown over time, as has investment in the factory. The original Press E has now been downgraded and replaced by a further four imported presses, and since 2015 it’s been fully automated. The uttermost care is taken with Barry on-hand checking each and every batch. Oils are cold pressed so as not to expose them to any heat and solvents which can damage the healthy fatty acids, nutrients and enzymes of the oil and regular microbiological and chemical analysis is carried out by external certified laboratories. Following pressing, the oil goes through an elaborate filtration system to remove any waxes and sediments leaving this gorgeous clear, transparent oil.

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but it’s how we look after the product post-extraction that is really important to ensure no oil degradation. From extracting the oils in a dark room that blocks damaging ultra violet light to double insulating our factory walls to create a constant room temperature, we do everything by globally recognised food safety standards,” says Midlands Nutritional Oils sales and marketing manager, Nigel Hosking. “We try to limit the variations by using the best quality raw materials we can, but obviously because its cold pressed there will always be slight seasonal differences due to climate.”

But it goes back even further than that, adds Andrew. Midlands prides itself on being involved in every step of the process, right from the farm gate through sowing, growing and harvesting to give it maximum traceability while guaranteeing both its plants and its farmers are taken care of every step of the way. “We see our suppliers, especially our seed suppliers, as being in partnership with us. Their success is our success.”

Although the majority of the oil-producing seed remains grown in a 100km radius of the factory, others are sourced from areas known as the best producers of their particular crop including some from overseas regions. Flax seed and hemp oil continue to be its core oils, but its range has also increased to include oils made from almonds, avocados, apricots, blackcurrants, borage seed, chia, echium, evening primrose, grape, kiwifruit, meadowfoam, pomegranate, perilla, pumpkin seed, rape seed, rosehip, safflower, walnuts, and wheatgerm.

Seeds arrive at the factory and are stored in a silo, before being fed through an automated system directly into the

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screw presses that separate the oil into bulk containers, while the “seed cake” comes out as pellets which can be used for human food applications or animal nutrition depending on the type of seed. The seed cake itself is also high in dietary fibre and protein, so also has huge potential health benefits. It takes on average 4kg of seed to get just one litre of oil. There’s less than five per cent wastage, and going forward Andrew hopes the company will find uses for 100 per cent. “We have made good progress in that area over the past 24 months.”



ABOVE The Midlands Nutritional Oils team (from left) Andrew Davidson, managing director and Midlands Seed director, Midlands Nutritional Oils marketing co-ordinator Diana Rowe, and Midlands Nutritional Oils sales and marketing manager, Nigel Hosking.



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“It has grown steadily but like any business it takes time to become established and gain momentum. Increased recognition of the need for healthy fats and oils as part of a staple diet has also helped, but with these types of markets there is always a risk. You have to be able to increase and decrease supply quickly and have alternative markets. There are still not many people doing it which is a reflection of the boutique nature of these markets and the challenges that come with it,” says Andrew.

While bulk wholesale nutritional oils, gourmet culinary oils, high temp cooking oils, skincare oils and functional food sales all over the world make up the majority of its business, Midlands Nutritional Oils also press and bottle oils for a number of overseas companies attracted by our “stamp of quality” under their own brands, where possible using New Zealand ingredients, explains Nigel. “That provenance is really important, that’s what the Asian markets want. It’s crucial for all our overseas clients when compared with other markets like China and Canada where they do not have the same traceability controls.”

As demand grew, Midlands Nutritional Oils decided to go out on a limb and have a go at it themselves, bottling its own range of oils for the domestic and overseas markets. This involved launching the new hemisphere™ range in the early days and more recently the omeganz™ range capitalising on the fantastic nutritional, health and skincare benefits. In addition to the oils, they also offer evening primrose oil, flax seed oil and hemp seed oil in soft gel capsule format.

Expanding its own bottled oil range is one area Andrew’s identified for huge potential growth in the future. “That’s definitely the direction we want to be heading. More value add.” But while he’s ultimately pleased with the way business



ABOVE TOP Hemp seed oil remains one of the mainstays of its own bottled range.

ABOVE The factory site on Walnut Avenue.



ABOVE: Midlands Nutritional Oils sales and marketing manager, Nigel Hosking surveying a rape crop at flowering.

is tracking, the Government's lack of movement on hemp amounts to a massive opportunity lost for the New Zealand arable sector, says Andrew.

When the Government relaxed laws in 2001 allowing companies to grow hemp under strict controls for hemp oil and hemp fibres for clothing or building materials, Andrew felt sure it was only a matter of time before they could sell all hemp products, including hemp food-based products like flour and vitamin supplements, but it's never happened. By limiting it to oil only, it's meant the hemp seed meal is relegated for sale as animal food making hemp seed a limited and less viable cropping option for farmers. Although hemp is a form of cannabis, it has almost undetectable levels of THC, so it is not used as a recreational drug. However, people still wrongly believe its marijuana. Midlands has lobbied the Government hard, to no avail.

The hemp debate is due to come up again at this month's Food Safety Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) forum meeting, but Andrew's not holding his breath. "It's frustrating. Every time we think we are getting close it gets pushed back again. We know how good hemp foods are, all the data is there, we just can't sell it. The future looks really exciting if we can get it through. There is huge potential. Everywhere else in the world can sell it (for human consumption), except New Zealand and Australia. Common sense should prevail but it hasn't yet."

Midlands has not sat still while waiting though, continuing to invest heavily in research and development of improved hemp cultivars so that if the breakthrough comes, it will be well-placed to take advantage of any relaxation in the strict rules around hemp.

In the meantime though, the focus is on doing what it does best, producing quality oils for the domestic and international market while developing new markets both here and abroad. ■

An advertisement for Omega NZ oils. At the top is the Omega NZ logo, a stylized Greek letter Omega with 'omeganz' below it. Below the logo is the text 'PERFECTION IS JUST A DROP AWAY' in large white letters, followed by 'COLD PRESSED OILS' in smaller white letters. The central image is a vibrant salad in a black bowl, featuring arugula, purple radicchio, white cheese cubes, and red cherry tomatoes. Below the salad are three bottles of oil: 'HEMP SEED OIL', 'GOLD OIL BLEND', and 'OLIVE OIL'. Each bottle has a black label with the Omega logo and a green leaf graphic. At the bottom right of the advertisement is the website 'omega-oils.co.nz'.