



“If you’re prepared to work (hard) seven days a week, work for me”

a go of the new life they’ve chosen and benefit from the long hours they put in.

“All my franchisee, they don’t have a lot of money, they have to borrow a lot of money to buy fruit shop they mortgage their house and so on. If they fail, I feel awful, they lose their house, they might lose their marriage, you know how it happens, so really I work very hard to protect them from things like that.”

Social responsibility

The thing about Ronald is, he doesn’t work hard just for work’s sake, he works out of a sense of commitment, pride and social responsibility. He’s proud to have created “400 jobs for New Zealand”, he cares about how his franchisees are going, he says the thing he loves most about the industry is the people he deals with, from the shop and market floor to the orchard and market garden.

His partner, Charlie Zheng, says that’s just the way Ronald is.

Recognition

Being that way has won him more than commercial success – it’s also won him industry and social accolades. In 2005 he won the annual Roger Davies Trophy for his services to horticulture, this year he was named an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the Queen’s Birthday Honours.

The awards have, he says, made him “very, very proud”, but he reckons it’s not his business acumen that’s won them – it’s his focus on people. “I think, serving the community,” he says.

But then, he adds, “I love it ... I’m happy to do it.” At the rate he’s going, he probably will still be happy to do it at 90.

Labour of love

A passion for fresh produce has kept Ronald Chan at the top of his game for almost 60 years. He’s a national treasure, as the Queen’s Birthday Honours recently recognised.

Ronald Chan walks to the small office window that looks out over the shop floor of the Albany Fruit World, on Auckland’s North Shore.

The shop is a hive of activity and a palette of colour – orange, red, green and yellow.

“You see the product look so nice, makes me very happy,” he says in English that’s still slightly broken after 60 years in New Zealand. “It’s a good job. Also I see a lot of customer in the shop, I’m very happy.”

It’s hard not to be swayed by the almost childlike enthusiasm of the 73-year-old founder of Fruit World, a chain of 23 fruit and veggie shops – 22 in Auckland and one in Hamilton. When discussing why he’s still going strong at his age, even adding new shops and creating a new brand, the word “love” frequently pops up.

“I belong to this industry. I love this industry – I love this industry more than anything else. I like to work.”

Youthful enterprise

There’s no questioning that. At an age when most people are kicking back, taking that world trip, relaxing and enjoying the fruits of their earlier labours, Ronald still gets up before 4am to go to the Auckland markets and buy for his chain, six days a week.

And he reckons that helps to explain why he’s in perfect

health, looking at least 20 years younger than he is, and with a doctor who tells him simply to keep doing what he’s doing for as long as he can do it. “I run pretty fast, I walk pretty fast at the market. I walk miles every morning.”

He won’t be surprised if he’s still doing this at 90 – as long as he remains healthy. If he does, he’ll break the record he’s already set – the best part of 60 years in the fruit and veggie industry.

Ronald was introduced to the industry that has dominated his life when in 1949, aged 13, he and his older brother flew to New Zealand from China, to be with their New Zealand-born father (their mother followed later).

Chan senior had a fruit and veggie shop on Auckland’s Karangahape Rd, and immediately put his two sons to work – hard.

Demanding schedule

“I start at five o’clock, set up the shop first, then go to school at eight o’clock. After school three o’clock come back, run back, because my father very strict ... we had hard times, drop my school bag start working until 12 o’clock at night, one o’clock in morning, and get up five o’clock ...” New Zealand’s child labour laws have changed somewhat in the intervening years.

But rather than putting the young Ronald off fruit and veggies

for life, the routine cemented in him a love for the business he’s never shaken. About a year after arriving in New Zealand, he left school to work fulltime in his father’s shop – within three years of arriving in New Zealand he had his own shop, in St Heliers.

Later, in the ’70s, with two partners he won the contract to run the fruit and veggie department at the 16-shop 3Guys supermarket chain. But in 1986, he gave in to his wife’s desire for a change, and moved to Hong Kong, where he opened a jewellery shop. It wasn’t one of his more successful ventures.

“The day I arrived in Hong Kong I want to come back ... it took me four years to come back ... I like Hong Kong for a holiday, not to live in ...I miss New Zealand, I love New Zealand ... New Zealand is natural, you are comfortable, you are so relaxed.”

And as for jewellery, give him a potato any day. “I didn’t like it ... you know, you don’t like the industry,” he shrugs, “you don’t like the industry ... I don’t like selling diamonds. I sit there for 10 hours measuring a lady’s finger ...I don’t like it. I like this industry.”

Ronald returned to New Zealand, where he started up the Veggie World chain with a partner in 1996. It grew to eight shops, but the partnership wasn’t working. So they split in 2002, with Ronald taking five of the shops and rebranding them as Fruit World.

Interest in franchises

Within a year, he had his first approach from someone wanting to become a Fruit World franchisee. “Somebody from the market actually, one of the market salesmen approached me. I said, ‘are you prepared to work hard? If you’re prepared to work seven days a week, work for me.’”

People have been approaching him ever since – he’s never advertised for franchisees – and the chain has grown to its present size in just seven years.

So why is it people want to open a Fruit World shop?

For a start, he says, they hear of him through other franchisees and like the way Fruit World operates – by offering wrap-around support to all its franchisees. Head office, he says, does everything from buying the produce to doing the paperwork and paying the wages for the 400-plus employees in the chain – all the franchisee has to do is run the shop. And that’s deliberate.

“Because some of franchisees English only limited, only so-so, they need somebody behind them, my English also so-so, because I never go to school, I got people work for me, but they all graduate university... I provide the service to each franchisee so the franchisee doesn’t need to know everything, we do everything.” Most of Fruit World’s franchisees are immigrants – and Ronald feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility to them, to help them make

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