

Sydney Morning Herald

12 June 2003, page 11

Say it with a Sao: we miss you heaps

By Anthony Dennis

They say Australians aren't especially patriotic. But put a packet of Twisties in front of the average dinky-di expatriate and it apparently melts as quickly as a Cherry Ripe left too long on the shelf of a general store at Marble Bar.

At least this is the theory (or near enough) of Mark Bergin and Megan Venters, a young Sydney couple who believe they have the cure for the acute homesickness and comfort-food pangs suffered by hundreds of thousands of Australians who live abroad.

They're about to launch their new business, The Great Aussie Tuckerbox, selling traditional blue-foam Eskies packed with the sort of items, such as Saos and Violet Crumbles, that remain largely unobtainable, or at the least extremely difficult to obtain, for many overseas Australians.

But their imminent attempt to profit from the Australian diaspora, one of the world's largest, with a population greater than that of Adelaide's choosing to live overseas won't be the first. In fact, it appears that the market is becoming extremely crowded.

There are more than a few companies, such as Aussie Favourite Food Online and Homesick.com.au, providing products, chosen from website shopping carts, or from the occasional shopfront, which bring Australia a little closer for distant expats.

(On the green-and-gold website for the Australia Shop in London, Arnott's Mint Slices surprisingly eclipse Tim Tams at the top of the "best-seller list", another example, perhaps of the average Australian's increasingly sophisticated tastes.)

Mr Bergin, 28, and Ms Venters, 25, believe their fledgling business will be a success. Not only do their Tuckerboxes contain obvious items such as Redskins, Milo and Weet-Bix, they also contain other antipodean essentials.

"We won't do just food," Ms Venters says. "We're going to offer language phrase books, Triple J top-100 CDs, thongs and ugh boots. If you're an Australian sitting in England and it's cold and you can't afford too much heating, a pair of ugh boots can come in fantastically well."

The couple say that the main impediment to successfully targeting overseas Australians in the past has been the weight of tinned products, which increases the cost of postage from Australia.

But Mr Bergin says he and Ms Venters have managed to control the weight of the Tuckerboxes (though possibly increasing the weight of the recipient, given the nature of the contents).

They've sourced lightweight tube packs of Vegemite, which are not widely available, and combination Aerogard and sunscreen.

And the couple are hoping that the parents of adult Australians living overseas will be attracted to the idea of the dispatching one of the Great Aussie Tuckerboxes as a gift or humanitarian gesture, depending on the severity of the cravings of their loved ones.

Such far-flung patriotism could be hard to stomach for some expats when it's realised that many of the products contained in the Great Aussie Tuckerboxes as well as those offered by other services are today manufactured by various American multi-nationals.

A Brussels-based Australian, Anne MacGregor, a co-founder of the Southern Cross Group, an Australian expatriate lobby organisation, remains a little sceptical about the success of such ventures as The Great Aussie Tuckerbox.

Many Australians living permanently overseas wait until they return home for holidays to stock up on their favourite morsels, while others simply go without, she argues.

"A lot of Australian expatriates will live on Marmite if they can't get Vegemite," Ms MacGregor says.

Caption: ILLUS: An idea with a Twistie . . . Mark Bergin and Megan Venters and their Great Aussie Tuckerbox. Photo: Ben Rushton