

Fry family celebrates 25 years of vegan food manufacturing

Fry's Family Foods is a family-owned food company, begun in South Africa in 1992, and now an international supplier of vegan foods, available in over 25 countries.



Wally Fry

When Wally Fry met his wife Debbie, she was a born vegetarian, whilst he was buying and selling livestock for slaughter. "I was the furthest thing from a vegetarian you could imagine," he says. Marriage to Debbie did not change his love of meat but faced with vegetarianism daily as a way of life it did make him think.

Wally joined the construction industry in 1989 and recalls being proud of one of his projects. "It was a 4,000 sow unit – a very complex structure to build and I was genuinely proud of it." However, on his return to the site he was moved by the reality of what he had created – an economic machine, capitalising on the life of another.

He questioned the ethical issues surrounding meat and took a decision. It took about 18 months to wind down his business to the point where he was willing to give up his income and start something completely new. "Something that I didn't know how to do but I knew I had to make a difference somehow."

With little knowledge and no real tools – but plenty of determination – Wally and Debbie spent close to two years in his family kitchen, working 24/7. They produced four products that mimicked the taste and feel of meat – a staple that had been in Wally's life since birth – all vegan and not genetically modified. "We knew we needed meat substitutes that tasted a lot like boerewors and hot dogs and burger patties. If they didn't, I wouldn't succeed."



"We developed the product to share with vegetarian friends and family. I started out doing this for myself, but in a sense, I did not believe I would make it – it is very, very tough becoming a vegetarian. It is worse than giving up smoking because it is a social thing. Take the turkey out of Christmas and what have you left? The real essence of Christmas. The real meaning. Once I had broken through these illusions, I had made it easier for myself. We created four or five beautiful, tasty products, really acceptable even to meat eaters."

Initially, it was just Wally and Debbie and they employed about three people. “I was literally loading a whole container on my own. Debbie did the weighing – I did the production – and we would clean the factory together in the evening, before going home.”

From having no factory, making products on a small burner with an AMC cooking pot, and thermometer to control the temperature, Wally was supplying a major supermarket chain eventually making 50kg a day of what became known as Fry’s Special. In one shift today Fry’s makes around 14,000 kg, exporting its vegan (no meat, egg or dairy), non-genetically modified products – 28 of them plus 15 catering products – to more than 25 countries.

Vegetarianism on the rise

Undoubtedly, vegetarianism is on the rise, and although that is great for Fry’s, it was never about the money. “What more could you want than to earn a living whilst doing something you love and something that aligns with your personal values but that is not what it’s about. It has always been about our family ethos, where we are committed to educating people about the negative impact animal agriculture has on the animals, our planet and biodiversity, and our health.”

For Wally, it is not even about being an animal lover. “I’m just a lover of practising no harm. I have a great respect for life. Increasingly, people understand that what they do as individuals has a negative or positive impact on everything else.”

In November 2012, Wally was invited to the World Preservation Foundation Conference in London to address the leaders of climate change management on the environmental impact of food production and farming. “By using the environment as our master instructor, we need to start the environmental revolution, which will go down in history as a far greater thing than the industrial revolution ever was.”

From his success in construction to his passion and dedication to minimising human impact on the environment, Wally has always maintained that if you apply your mind and effort to perfection you will be successful. “It is not the easy road that will help you to achieve the greatest things, rather the road less travelled. By making a tasty, healthy alternative to meat, the Fry family is helping to change the world. This philosophy is captured perfectly in the family mantra ‘Through my personal choices and actions I can help change the world’,” concludes Wally.