



TEMPTING: Robern Menz chief executive Phil Sims tries his hand at making a FruChocs chocolate cake. Picture: DEAN MARTIN

Whether through money, talent or just good old-fashioned hard work, certain families dominate the state's business and social landscape.

In the first of a series of articles on SA dynasties, **CRAIG COOK** looks at the Sims family whose company produces one of Australia's most popular sweets.

**Y**OU know you are on a winner when the Premier spruiks your product without prompting, which is just what Jay Weatherill did last year for FruChocs.

Formed in 1992 from two famous South Australian brands, Robern and Menz, the company is owned by the Sims family, which has a history with confectionary products stretching back more than 100 years and four generations.

Current chief executive Phil Sims says Mr Weatherill got in touch last year about FruChocs, a chocolate covered fruit treat, first launched in 1948.

"That was such a great advertisement for the benefits of social media," says Mr Sims, whose business has more than 60,000 Facebook followers.

"A little flippantly, we posted that 'FruChoc Appreciation Day' (August 30) – a concept we've been trying to get going for two years – should be granted public holiday status.

"The Premier follows us on Twitter and jokingly flicked back a response saying he had granted the public holiday – and could we please send him some chocolates."

Within 48 hours, a 60-second video – filmed to look like a US presidential address to the nation – had been produced.

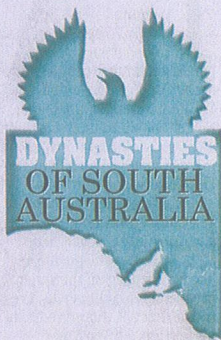
"If Melbourne can celebrate a horse race, surely we can take time to celebrate these tasty treats," the sweet-toothed premier told viewers. "They're better than anything from across the border."

"To paraphrase Bob Hawke, any boss who sacks a worker for eating FruChocs at work today is a bum."

FruChocs is not the only official South Australian commercial icon connected with the company's proud history, stretching back 164 years to the day Prussian migrants Johan and Magdalena Menz began their grocery and baking business, W. Menz & Co, in Wakefield St, city, in the early 1850s.

In a bluestone building – still standing opposite the fire station – they produced their household favourite Yo-Yo biscuit.

When Johan died in 1856, Magdalena took over the firm until handing the business on to sons William and August in 1867. Expansions during the next 50 years saw Menz sell off the bread and pastry side of the business and focus on confectionary, before moving to larg-



er premises at Marleston. The family sold the Menz business to Arnotts in 1962.

Thirty years later – when global giant Campbell Soup Company bought out Arnotts – the Menz confectionary arm was sold to Robern, a South Australian dried fruit company.

"Over 100 odd years you make good and bad business decisions and that was one of our best made by my father (Grantley Sims)," Phil Sims says.

"We enjoy celebrating the Menz history as part of our own business evolution."

The latest example came during History Week this year when the State Government asked the firm for an unusual sponsorship arrangement.

"They asked us to sponsor a special tour of the West Terrace cemetery," Mr Sims says.

"The Menz family has a crypt there with a large number of members entombed."

"There were a couple of actors standing by the crypt dressed up as Johan and Magdalena telling the Menz family history and we gave them bags of FruChocs to hand out to add to the fun."

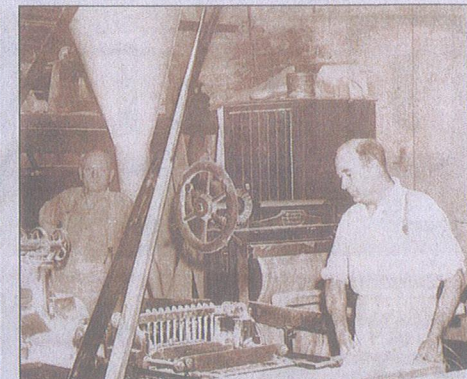
The history of the Robern business – with a background in dried, glace and canned fruit, dehydrated vegetables provided in ration packs to the allied forces during World War II – begins with Philip's great-grandfather, Walter Sims, in 1908.

"Walter started the Serve-Wel shop banner of supermarkets but he couldn't get enough dried fruit so he opened up his own factory in the Riverland," Phil Sims says.

"Robern's history touches many country towns and, at its height, there were around eight factories dotted around the state."

Tough times hit the fruit industry in the late 1960s when the UK joined the European Common Market and Australia lost its preferential duty rate with its biggest importer.

As a consequence, Robern –



SO SWEET: Marilyn and Grantley Sims surrounded by family, clockwise from top, Edward Sims, 14, Phil and Colleen Sims, Lara Sims, 11, Mitchell Sims, 9, Daniel Sims, 7, Joshua Sims, 11, and Rebecca Pitt and Richard Sims. Picture: CAMPBELL BRODIE



LOOK INTO THE PAST: Workers at W. Menz and Co factory in the 1930s (top); the factory (below) in the early 1900s; and Walter Sims (right).



**THE ROBERN MENZ BUSINESS EMPIRE**

**1850:** Johan and Magdalena Menz began the grocery and baking business W. Menz & Co, in Wakefield Street, city. Iconic Yo-Yos biscuits become a household favourite

**1892:** New equipment is installed to produce confectionery, in particular the peppermint lozenge today known as Menz Crown Mints

**1908:** Walter Sims opens the first of his four grocery stores in North Unley

**1926:** He buys a factory in Irymple, near Mildura, to ensure a reliable supply of dried fruit. The Robern name is born – a hybrid name dedicated to the memory of friend Robert Burnell

**1934:** Sims becomes the first grocery retailer to join the Serv-Wel co-operative chain of stores

**1940:** Edgar Sims expands the manufacturing business to include dried, canned and frozen fruit and dehydrated vegetables in six factories, at Loxton, Irymple, Angaston, Mile End, Hectorville and North Unley

**1948:** Menz creates the chocolate-coated fruit treat FruChocs

**1964:** Menz joins other biscuit manufacturers to form Arnott-Motteram-Menz

**1970:** Grantley Sims introduces mechanised production to compete with overseas suppliers

**1978:** Robern enters the confectionery market, buying Tandy Lifesavers

**1985:** Robern buys a honeycomb plant from confectionary giant

**Headleys'** and opens manufacturing plant in Stepney

**1992:** US company Campbell Soup Company takes over Arnotts Biscuits and Robern buys offshoot Menz Confectionery. The company Robern Menz is then formed

**1995:** Robern Menz buys the former Glover-Gibbs pie factory and relocates all its fruit and confectionery manufacturing to the premises in Glynburn Rd, Glynde

**2005:** Menz FruChocs named an official "Icon of South Australia" by the National Trust

**2008:** Robern Menz celebrates 100 years of Sims family business ownership

**2013:** Premier Jay Weatherill makes a 60-second TV commercial promoting FruChocs

With a head office in a former Balfours' factory on Glynburn Rd, Glynde, Robern Menz employs more than 80 staff and has three retail outlets at Glynde, McLaren Vale and Hahndorf, the latter established about 18 months ago.

The company – with an annual turnover of about \$25 million – sells a range of products

through leading supermarket retailers across the country.

Other popular brands include Menz Crown Mints, Choc Honeycomb and Choccy Snakes.

Phil's brother, Richard, is manager of operations while, Grantley, is board chairman.

The next generation of Sims are a little too young – aged

from seven to 14 – for any immediate decisions on who might take on responsibility for the business but it won't be handed over on a plate.

"The opportunity is there but they'll have to work for that opportunity just like Richard and I did," Phil Sims says.

"We both worked outside of the business until there was an opening.

"It's important that you can bring in greater knowledge and experience of how other operations work to continue to grow the business and ensure it survives."

Diversification is a key to continued success although one strategy that failed was entering the wine industry in the late 1970s before the viticulture boom began.

"That didn't work out too well but we are always keeping your eye on an opportunity in non-traditional areas," Mr Sims says.

"The way we have been able to change and evolve has helped us survive; we're still here and working hard for a solid future."

New export opportunities have opened up in North America and Asia and Robern Menz has never been busier as it enters the peak production season in the run up to Christmas.

A takeover launched by an-

other business is always a possibility but would come with a big tug at emotional heartstrings.

"We've had approaches to take over the business and you'd be silly not to look at those closely but it would have to be a good offer for shareholders," Mr Sims says.

"There's a lot of emotional attachment to something built by so many family members

and we need to consider the next generation and what they might want to do.

"Our families are totally involved with the business because they listen to us and support us and get involved with the fun times at the Royal Show and the Christmas pageants around town when our mascot Mr FruChoc is out and about."

So, what chance is there of Mr Weatherill ever donning the Mr FruChoc costume and parading around town?

"The Premier has been great to us but that might be pushing our luck just a little bit too much," Phil Sims adds with a laugh.

**VIDEO:** SEE PREMIER JAY WEATHERILL'S ENDORSEMENT OF FRUCHOCS. ADVERTISER.COM.AU



POPULAR: The Menz FruChocs mascot.

# NOT-SO-SECRET MENZ BUSINESS