Noosa bucked old trends to cultivate new growth

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"We were complete strangers going into business in a getting-to-know-you, full-speed-ahead way."

That's how Koel Thomae describes how she and co-founder Rob Graves started Noosa Yoghurt.

The idea started when Thomae sampled a taste of Australian yoghurt in a beach town named Noosa near Australia's Sunshine Coast.

An Aussie ex-pat, Thomae was living in Colorado at the time and felt driven to develop her own version of the yoghurt, which is spelled with an 'h' in honor of its Australian roots.

"I was looking for a milk supplier and started to learn about all the complexities of the dairy industry when I came across a flyer for Morning Fresh Dairy," she said. "The fact that they grew their own crops with no hormones or pesticides really piqued my interest, so I cold-called Rob, and he agreed to meet."

"I think he thought I was a little crazy."

Graves, who was unavailable at the time of this interview, is a fourth-generation dairy farmer on the family farm, Morning Fresh Dairy in Bell-
Thomae said that Graves was instantly on-board when he tasted her yoghurt. "It's made from best-in-class fruit puree and whole milk infused with honey — it's like eating velvet," she said.

Making Noosa a sought-after product took a bit of convincing when they first took it market.

"We were going against old trends at the time because it's whole fat, whole milk, and in 2010, the trend was low fat and no fat," she said. "Even though it was against industry norms, though, we thought that if we could get people to taste it they would love it."

And they did. Early on, however, tying down the right branding and marketing proved challenging.

Noosa hit what Thomae called a "stumble" when they partnered up with a retailer in New York.

"The retailer treated us like any other yoghurt on the shelf instead of as a premium and unique product," she said. "Instead of working with us to determine how we could be successful together, they took the same approach as with any other yoghurt."

Problems such as having a premium price, a short shelf life and a weak strategic plan took a toll on the company.

"We had to pull out because we didn't have the resources to meet their rules for delivering product, and it set us back tens of thousands of dollars," Thomae said.

The lesson learned was to build the brand locally and create a strategic plan to use when they were ready to go out of state.

Another lesson was to stick to the core product. "I got a lot of input from consumers to do too many things at once and learned that you can't be all things to all people," she said. "Not all opportunities are the right opportunities."

It's all paid off, however. Noosa was acquired in 2014 by Advent Inter-