

Cofounder Brian Coppin reflects on 30 years of Food Lover's Market

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Family-owned Food Lover's Market Group is [celebrating 30 years](#) of being in business, transforming from a single fruit and veg store into South Africa's largest privately-owned retailer.



Food Lover's Market cofounders Mike Coppin and Brian Coppin. Source: Supplied

In 1993, brothers Brian and Mike Coppin launched their first Fruit & Veg City store at Access Park in Cape Town, painting and merchandising it themselves with the help of friends and family. Since these humble beginnings with just six employees, the company's staff complement has grown to 17,000 and the store footprint now exceeds 100 across Southern Africa.

While the retailer has rebranded to Food Lover's Market and the fruit and veg stores have transformed into [fully-fledged sophisticated supermarkets](#), the retailer remains family-owned and run and its ambition to be the "best in fresh" remains intact.

Over the years, the retailer has expanded its range of products and services, adding gourmet butcheries, delis, grocery and health & wellness departments, and investing in modern store design. These decisions have helped establish Food Lover's as a major player in South Africa's food retail industry.



Source: Supplied

Beyond its eponymous store brand, strategic expansion and acquisitions have fuelled further growth of the broader Food Lover's Market Group. The company now encompasses convenience chain FreshStop at Caltex, import and export company FVC International, liquor chains Diamond Discount Liquor and Market Liquors, and artisan coffee brand Seattle Coffee Company.

As the Food Lover's Market Group celebrates its 30th anniversary, it is a testament to the vision and dedication of its founders, who started the business with a simple idea and turned it into a thriving enterprise.

Brian Coppin, CEO and cofounder of Food Lover's Market Group, shares more about the inspiring business journey and how value, variety, diversification and supplier relationships have played a part in the company's success.

■ **Brian, congrats on your 30-year milestone. Reflecting back, what were the first few years of running the business like?**

On reflection, at no time did we think we were building a brand of this size. We were just two youngsters trying to open a fruit and vegetable business that the customers would love.

We were the new kids on the block, and the markets had changed with all the big retailers exiting the municipal markets at that stage, which left a massive opportunity for us to either go to the market or directly to the farmers' gate, pay cash and get the products faster, fresher and with much better value.

When we opened in those days, it was super exciting because the whole Southern Suburbs loved the new brand, Fruit & Veg City, and flocked into the store to come and see what it was all about.



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■ ***In your opinion, what has been the most important business move made during the history of the Food Lover's Market Group?***

After 18 months, we decided to open a second and third store and needed to understand if the model could be successfully rolled out in other areas. Access Park was so successful, but initially, we struggled to get a model that could be rolled out to the rest of the country.

Eventually, we got the model right, opened more stores, and started franchising Fruit & Veg City in areas outside the central business district. We then began adding departments like Milk on Tap, and Juice on Tap, dabbling in the bakery and some Italian products we brought in from Italy.

Only after 10 years did we realise that we were no longer the new kids on the block, and the other supermarkets had noticed us and were upping their game in fresh produce. We knew that to be the best fresh destination in South Africa, we needed to ensure that every other fresh department was as good as the fruit and veg department. We were opening butchery, bakery, fish, deli and sushi departments.

To ensure that we were the best in South Africa, we visited international stores - from Waitrose and Selfridges in London to Wegmans, Stew Leonard's, Trader Joe's and Wholefoods in America.

“ We aimed to discover innovation in fresh and the best of class. We then decided to change Fruit & Veg City into Food Lover's Market, arguably the most crucial business move we made to become the best fresh destination in South Africa. ”



Source: Supplied

■ ***Could you point out some of the pros and cons of running a family-owned business?***

The obvious pro of running a family business is that the culture created amongst the family also extends to the rest of the

business. We find that the people who joined us 30 years ago are still around, they've been promoted up the chain and running bigger divisions, and they've become part of the wider family. As a result of that culture and that extended family approach, we have a unique position in the market.

If there's any challenge, it's that we have to ensure that everyone understands each other's roles and manage expectations amongst family members.



Travis, Brian, Aubrey, Mike and Dane Coppin, and Terri Coppin-Harris. Source: Supplied

■ ***With the group now comprising Food Lover's Market, FreshStop, FVC International, Diamond Discount Liquor and Market Liquors, and Seattle Coffee Company, can you comment on how these various divisions have contributed to the success of the overall group?***

FVC International was started as an import and export business because we were the biggest importers in South Africa at the time. We had fantastic relationships, and we could leverage those relationships to export to the rest of the world. We had the opportunity to take the farmer's whole crop and use it in different areas - either domestically or internationally.

FreshStop came next and was born out of a fantastic opportunity when Chevron decided to focus on fuel and was looking for a retailer to propose a new brand that could stand on the forecourts and be a great convenience brand. It's been incredibly successful for us - we now have 360 stores, and the business continues to outgrow the rest of the convenience industry.

Whilst building FreshStop, we were introduced to the founders of Seattle. We quickly realised that this was the most exciting coffee brand in the country and wasted no time making a deal to buy a controlling stake in Seattle Coffee Coffee, but it is still run by the founders, Barry Parker and Pete Howie.

We bought Diamond's Discount Liquors purely to get economy of scale to open a Market Liquor outlet next to a Food Lover's Market to enhance the customer experience.

■ ***Food Lover's often makes mention of its close relationships with suppliers. How has the company gone about nurturing these relationships?***

Right at the onset, we have had strong relationships with farmers built on a shared vision that we could grow Food Lover's Market while growing their enterprises at the same time. Those mutually beneficial relationships have gone from strength to strength.

■ **Comparing the first Fruit & Veg store to a new-generation Food Lover's Market flagship store, there are of course marked differences. Can you comment on the strategy behind the evolution and expansion of Food Lover's Market in the grocery retail space?**

As we've mentioned, Food Lover's Market needed to be the best in fresh. Right from the start of Access park, our brand promise was to have the widest range of fresh produce and guaranteed our consumers that if it's growing in South Africa, they will find it on our shelves.

We said we would never be beaten on price, and if we were, we'll match that price and pay the difference. We knew quality would always be the top priority, so we offered a double your money-back promise on quality. We also said that if you were unhappy with our service and you told us, we'd give you a voucher at our store. That brand promise has been with us for 30 years - it's our Best in Fresh Guarantee.

“ As a brand, we decided a while ago that it was never going to be about the number of stores we could open, but it was always going to be about being the best store in the community, wherever we opened a store. That philosophy continues today. ”

■ **What are the group's expansion plans for further store rollout and revamps?**

We continue to roll out between five and eight stores annually, and it is usually split 50/50 between new stores and rebuilds.



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■ **Closing off, what's been the most rewarding part of your career in retail?**

It would be the establishment of our Earth Lovers initiative, which was born out of a book by John Mackey called *Conscious Capitalism*. We wanted to be the most admired brand amongst all our colleagues. The amount of lives we touch and change by living our Earth Lovers values is the most rewarding part of what we do - from communities, consumers, suppliers and most importantly, our colleagues.

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