

More than just a food bowl

John Stensholt

Anthony Di Pietro believes the Australian food industry should be exporting its knowledge and expertise as well as trying to become Asia's "food bowl".

The chief executive of fruit and vegetable company **Premier Fruits Group** and chairman of A-League football club Melbourne Victory, Di Pietro is investigating merger and acquisition opportunities in Asia, a region he believes his sporting connections could help him do more business.

Victory will have a one-game play-off to enter the Asian Champions League in 2014, which if it wins will take it to the group stages that will mean the team will probably play in Japan, China and South Korea.

"Asia is football mad and I want the A-League to be the football powerhouse of Asia," Di Pietro tells *The Australian Financial Review*.

"That can open so many economic, commercial and cultural goals. Football is a wonderful conduit to build those relationships."

PFG, owned privately by three families, turns over about \$250 million annually and has operations in most states around Australia. "We go right through the supply chain, from the farm to distribution and warehousing to marketing and value-adding," says Di Pietro.

He says Australian companies should look at the region not only for food export opportunities but also to do business in all facets of the food sector.

"I would call for business and government to think about, as the mining boom wanes, that we should not just have an Asian food boom but an Australian-led Asian food boom," Di Pietro says.

"I think it's not just about growing products, people need to think outside that. We can export our knowledge as well as our products. We should create a groundswell around this. It's not just saying 'here is a box of oranges'. It's 'here's just a box of oranges and everything else we do.'"

That is why, Di Pietro says, his company is investigating buying food companies in the region.

"What we can bring and add value to that organisation is our supply chain, our food safety, our hazard and critical



Anthony Di Pietro believes the food industry can also export knowledge to the Asian region. PHOTO: LUIS ASCUI

control processes, our knowledge of product development, marketing and branding. These are the things that Australian companies can bring."

Coles and **Woolworths** are two of PFG's biggest clients, a situation that Di Pietro says is also a positive for his Asian exporting strategy because of the supermarket giants' stringent supplier requirements.

"I think the demands of Coles and Woolworths... what it has done for our company is created disciplines and processes in the business that make us world leading in supply-chain management. They are highly respected organisations for their strict quality standards by other retailers."

"We recently had a meeting with [retail chain] FairPrice in Singapore and they said if you can deal with Coles and Woolworths in Australia and successfully do that, you can certainly come and knock on our door for business."

Di Pietro admits the company has had takeover offers from private equity – many of its rivals have been bought in recent years – but wants to remain in family hands for now.