



## INNOVATION IN THE SEA

# Perfume a pearler of an idea

**Kim Macdonald**

Three short years ago, Atlas Pearls was facing bankruptcy, struggling with just three Australian-based customers.

Today, it is selling 80 per cent of its pearls to about 50 of the world's biggest wholesalers, with its pearls featured from Place Vendome in Paris to New York's 5th Avenue.

The company has been recognised for its stunning turnaround as a finalist in the agribusiness export and innovation excellence categories in the 2014 WA Industry and Export Awards.

While the pearl industry has struggled globally, Atlas has managed to increase its gross revenue by 65 per cent year on year.

Atlas chairman Stephen Birkbeck said the key to its success was three-fold.

Speaking from Paris this week, where he was on a business trip, he said the company's innovative use of research and development had led it to better utilise the developed oyster.

Rather than only using the pearl, which comprises only one per cent of the oyster, the com-

pany extracted peptides from the harvested oyster too, and used them to make perfume.

A subsidiary of the company, Essential Oils of Tasmania, had won a \$1.1 million grant to commercialise the world's first perfume made from pearls.

The salty, floral pearl perfume, Ayu, already sells on a small scale at Atlas' Claremont store, but is being finessed by some top-level French perfumers.

Mr Birkbeck said the perfume has been years in the making.

"There is a long lead time in innovation before you get your first dollar," he said.

Mr Birkbeck said clever marketing was also behind the company's growing success, which came at a time many pearl companies were struggling to survive.

"As a result of negative tension on prices, a number of pearl companies have disappeared," he said.

"It was only the most cost efficient and creative that survived."

Clever marketing and a restructure to bring in some new top-level staff, helped it expand.

Atlas worked closely with French perfumers, including Parisian master Michel Roudnitska, whose father Edmond was the legendary creator of some of the world's most famous fragrances, including Dior's Eau Sauvage.

"We have a unique French touch," he said.

Mr Birkbeck, a farmer from the South West, said moves to integrate Essential Oils of Tasmania with Atlas Pearls had turned it into an agribusiness.

But innovative research meant it would move into the biotech sphere before long.



**Atlas Pearls boss Steve Birkbeck**



**Haulers:** Workers pull nets full of oysters ready for harvest at Atlas Pearls' Alyui Pearl farm in the far east of Indonesia, near West Papua.