

INVEST

CLEAN, GREEN IMAGE MATCHES PRECIOUS PRODUCT



WILLIAM ZHAO, YASHILI NEW ZEALAND DAIRY COMPANY

William Zhao's office looks out over the lower reaches of the Bombay Hills. In one direction verdant fields stretch to the bush-covered foothills. In the other a 1500-site subdivision will eventually ease the pressure on Auckland's bulging housing market.

William is the general manager of Yashili New Zealand Dairy Company, sited at Pokeno. He chose the site for the \$220 million infant milk formula production plant after a search that took him to Hamilton, Tauranga and the South Island.

"This was the perfect site for a number of reasons, says the 49-year-old, who has spent 26 years in the infant formula industry, including 12 years as a manager for Nestle in China. "The reputation and long tradition of the Waikato in the dairy industry is well known. Plus, in logistical terms, the site is close to the Ports of Auckland and Tauranga."

The Yashili plant – a subsidiary of China's Yashili International Holdings and Mengniu Dairy Co – was opened at the end of last year. William arrived to oversee the project in 2012. He is proud of the plant and its products, which are now sold in New Zealand, as well as China. "Chinese consumers are very aware of New Zealand's reputation as a clean, unpolluted land.

This was the only country we considered when the company decided to open its first overseas plant."

Quality controls are rigorous. The company is audited by AsureQuality, the global gold standard in food safety. William enjoys taking guests on a tour of the plant and listing its safety credentials: total automation to ensure consistency; bar codes on each can of infant formula that identify the production date and provenance of the ingredients. The cans are designed so parents can prepare the formula without touching the product. "It is essential we can reassure mums that the product is top quality."

He says he is pleased the premium product is now available in New Zealand supermarkets. "We are a local company and it is good to be supplying a local market." And he believes other companies will be attracted to the area – especially food-related businesses. "We could become the 'food basket' of the Waikato."

Pokeno may now be on the world map, but it is still best known by New Zealanders for the ice creams at the local dairy. William is a fan; his favourite flavour: Cookies and Cream. "I have introduced a lot of overseas visitors to that shop."