

SOUTHERN RIVERINA IRRIGATORS

Food *for* thought



Welcome



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Southern Riverina
Irrigators
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IN THE past few years as a journalist covering the growing threat from poor water policy and the Basin Plan, and in the past few months as chief executive of Southern Riverina Irrigators; I have been on the frontline watching and working alongside our farmers.

At the same time the majority of Australians still do not comprehend the importance of agriculture within the Australian story – and economy – and its role in our country's future.

Agriculture's capacity to build true wealth, not just at a farm level but in our towns and cities and their combined communities, is unprecedented.

And unlike other economic booms agriculture is a renewable industry.

But it must be managed correctly and given the support and resources it needs to not just survive but to thrive.

In the case of the Southern Riverina; a true food bowl for the nation – irrigation goes hand in hand with success.

The Southern Riverina stands out in Australian agriculture as a diverse and productive region; producing staples from rice, cereal, livestock and dairy through to niche products including mushrooms, organic stone milled flour and eggs.

Its farmers are world class and many are industry innovators and leaders.

Food For Thought is a tribute to this region and its farmers.

Agriculture in the Southern Riverina's farming industry injects millions of dollars into local economies and billions into the national economy.

And the best Australia has to offer in return as we go to press is the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, which only serves to cripple the region, compounded by poor water policy and governments that seem oblivious to the disaster

unfolding in front of their eyes.

Despite that damning indifference, our farmers are still getting up every day and are still doing what they love – producing food for the nation.

If you think the output is impressive now, just imagine what could be achieved if Southern Riverina's farmers got their water back.

And in the end, that is all we are asking, we want our fair share.

This magazine is a showcase of the lengths our farmers have had to go to remain viable.

I would like to thank all the families who welcomed us onto their properties and appeal to everyone reading this to join us in sending the message that our producers not only have the right to farm; the country needs them on the land and on the job.

If they aren't then every man, woman and child in Australia will pay the price for a golden opportunity lost.

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FOOD For Thought is a demonstration of the commitment – and the determination – of the southern Riverina farming community to do whatever it takes to do what it does best.

Feed Australia.

As your chair of Southern Riverina Irrigators I have been loudly advocating for change – and have been heartened by the community support we have garnered along the way.

I read through this magazine and I see determination, I see innovation, I see pride and I see guts.

I see family farms incorporating best practice, I see farms doing amazing things.

All in the face of adversity.

And I see the will to fight.

Imagine what we could achieve if the tap was turned back on and water was returned to where it rightfully belongs.

We only want what is ours; and we will continue to fight until we get it.

In a country crying out for economic stimulus; just give us back our water and we will do the rest.

For the past three years our farmers have been forced to make lifechanging decisions about their businesses and their families while watching untouchable water flow past their farm gates.

They have watched on as the lifeblood of Australian farming has been spilt into forests time and time again as the insatiable downstream demand continues unabated.

Most disheartening of all, they have watched the absurdity of precious water flushed out to sea rather than be used on highly productive farmland.

North of us irrigators blithely go about their business of illegal floodplain harvesting.

For too long thousands of gigalitres of water have been ripped out of the system by unlicensed and unmetered irrigators – and to rub salt into a very raw wound, then hoard it on their properties in storage systems constructed without the appropriate works permits.

While at the same time the farmers of the southern Riverina are metered to within an inch of our lives.

Here we sit, in the southern Riverina, with little – or no – allocations as the reliability of our general security water erodes away; from its long-term average of 84 per cent to just 48 per cent.

And there have been casualties.

Just a decade ago there were 90 dairy farmers in our region; today just 20 remain.

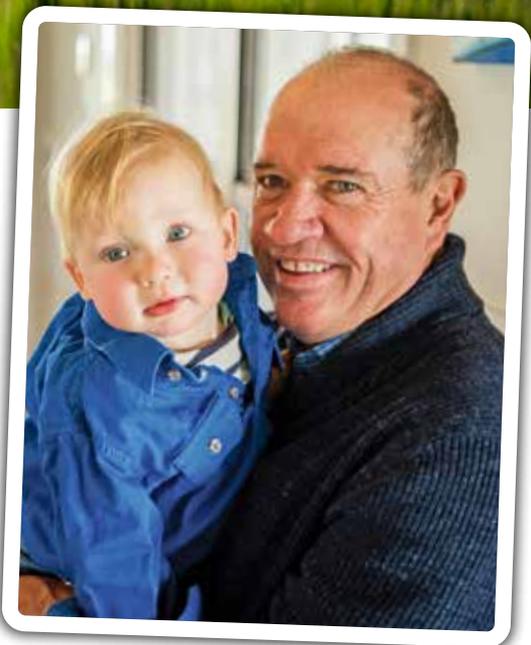
Australia's crop production has fallen, every year for the past three years, compounded by this year's dismal rice harvest of just 57,000 tonnes.

In the cold light of day that means Australia is out of homegrown rice, with no domestic supply expected until autumn 2021.

Do the sums.

Australia is now reliant on imports.

That might not even raise a blip on the metropolitan consumption radar



but we know, and even if governments won't acknowledge it, they know we are approaching a dangerous new world where our food supply will be reliant on the largesse of overseas producers and whatever prices they want to charge.

In lean years the food might not be there whatever the price.

So who is out there fighting for us?

Certainly not The Nationals, who seem content to hang the Southern Riverina out to dry.

Which means it is up to us; we must do all the work on the farms; we must do all the work to feed Australia and now we must do the fighting ourselves as well.

I want my grandchildren to have the option to be farmers if they choose.

We are in this for the long haul and we won't stop fighting until we get a fair outcome.

A man and a woman are sitting outdoors, leaning against a large, textured tree trunk. The man, on the left, has a beard and is wearing a brown jacket over a blue shirt. The woman, on the right, is wearing a black jacket over a light blue turtleneck. They are both looking towards the camera with slight smiles. The background shows more trees and a bright, slightly hazy sky.

Farming first, Federation a (very) distant second

SOPHIE BALDWIN meets the scion of an Australian farming dynasty who has been working with his wife to redefine the essence of the family property at Caldwell – and they’re making a pretty good job of it

JO AND Don Hearn have accomplished a lot in the 24 years since they consigned their dusty and well-travelled backpacks to a cupboard and took up the tools for a life of farming at Caldwell, north of Moama.

From the early days, when they decided to grow grapes for wine production, the business has grown to encompass a thriving Jungle Lane Beef Co, award winning Restdown vineyard and cellar door, along with a 60 acre wetland site and growing eco-tourism side line on 1100 certified organic acres. “We started here in 1996 and initially had no idea what to do on just 20 acres. Don grew up in the area and is the sixth generation of his family to farm here,” Jo said.

Don adds next year the Hearn family will celebrate its 180th year of continuous farming in Australia.

“We were farming the land 60 years before Federation, which is incredible to think,” Don said.

When the Hearn family first arrived in Australia they were traditional sheep farmers but the arrival of irrigation in the 1950s opened the family business to a world of possibility and opportunity including sheep, beef and of course a much more reliable cropping program.

For Jo and Don, diversification has always been a core part of their own farming journey but equally as important has been their commitment to sustainability and their desire to improve their land and leave it in better shape than when they started.

“We are guided by strong principles of sustainability and organic and bio-dynamic farming along with carbon farming,” Jo said.

In 2007, the couple established a 60-acre wetland which they describe as the kidneys of the property, filtering groundwater and providing important habitat for a huge range of plants, animals and insects.

“Bio-diversity is so vital to agriculture, promoting pollination and balancing

insect populations to assist with pest management,” Jo said.

Don remembers the wetland flourishing back in the 1970s and along with Jo, he wanted to make sure it would be around for generations to come which is why they have an environmental covenant across the entire area.

“It can never be cleared although we are allowed to graze it at certain times of the year if we need to – it is a bit like having an emergency shed of hay on hand,” he said.

During the millennium drought Jo and Don were able to apply for funding to purchase signage and build a boardwalk through the wetland.

“As we are losing older members of the public, we found the oral history of the region was being lost and the signs help with that knowledge,” he said.

The couple applied for an environmental water allocation through the Murray Darling Working Wetlands Group, a group formed (independent

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Allowing cattle to only graze on naturally occurring grasses and pastures full of nutrition and natural health-giving properties, means the resulting meat is succulent, flavoursome and tender, people always comment on the beautiful taste of our meat which we attribute to the health and wellbeing of our animals and of course our farm management



of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority) to rehabilitate degraded wetlands throughout the Murray and Lower Darling catchments of NSW.

“Every three years or so we can access a flush of environmental water which is delivered to us slowly over a period of time, unlike the enormous environmental flushes the MDBA currently delivers, whether they are needed or not,” Don said.

The couple also formed a partnership with ANU in Canberra, which has been regularly surveying the wetland environment. Surveys have found more than 60 species of birds, many different plant species which come and go dependent on season, four species of frogs and numerous reptiles and insects.

An environmental champion program through Rice Growers Australia which included a carbon assessment program, indicated Restdown is a carbon sink and better than carbon neutral.

Over recent times eco-tourism has become an important aspect of the business enabling Jo and Don to educate the wider public on Restdown and all it represents.

“We have found this to be a great way to bridge the gap – people can sit down and sample our wine and platters of locally grown produce. They can see contented cows in the paddock and see the wetland and how we can combine everything in a sustainable matter.”

While change is always a constant in farming, the couple are currently going through one of their toughest ones yet, pulling out 14 acres of vines. >>>



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These vines were painstakingly nurtured through the millennium drought but lack of water security and the unsustainable high price of the temporary water market, particularly over the last two years, has forced the couple into pulling out the majority of their vines.

"I have 6000 vines to pull out and it is heartbreaking, there was so much blood sweat and tears that went into growing and nurturing them over the 24 years," Don said.

"In the future we will just grow enough to support our own wine label, instead of growing grapes for others like we used to," Jo said.

While they may be scaling back the vineyard they are currently increasing their Jungle Lane Beef Co line which also took a battering over the last couple of years.

Two years ago they had 90 breeders, but without water they could no longer sustain their herd and they had to send 60 perfectly good pregnant animals

off to the abattoirs, along with their 3 month old calves.

"It was one of the worst moments we have ever had on the farm – selling perfectly good stock just because we were not given any allocation two years in a row was just devastating—all the time, money and effort we had spent building up the herd was lost as the semi drove out the gate in a cloud of dust," Jo said.

Two years ago Jungle Lane Beef was distributed to Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide.

Fortunately; the return of a better season has enabled the couple to start to rebuild their organic Hereford herd and breeder numbers are currently sitting around 40 head.

"We have started back processing one animal a month; which we sell in 10 kg mixed cut packs that are proving to be very popular and our customer database is continuing to grow as business builds back up again," Don said.

The couple only process animals they

feel are ready and they have been known to delay processing if they think the animal needs a bit longer to grow out.

"The most important thing to us is to supply a top quality product to our customers.

"Allowing cattle to only graze on naturally occurring grasses and pastures full of nutrition and natural health-giving properties, means the resulting meat is succulent, flavoursome and tender, people always comment on the beautiful taste of our meat which we attribute to the health and wellbeing of our animals and of course our farm management," Jo said

Both Jo and Don acknowledge farming is a tough game but they love welcoming visitors to Restdown to share their passion for organic food, wine and sustainable farming.

And while there might be times when they are juggling many different things, they certainly wouldn't have it any other way.



**Leave the water
in the hands of
Australian-owned
family farms**

*and watch our
economy grow >>>*



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SOPHIE BALDWIN talked with a Finley family about the downhill run which has seen them left with next to no water. She also saw the local economic potential if the region's farms get the water they need and get back to full production. It's a good news story going begging

JAMES loves nothing more than sitting up in the header next to his pop and harvesting rice; and even though he is only six, all he wants to be when he grows up is a farmer.

Mum, Sharni Hood; is doing her best to ensure he has every opportunity.

Sharni grew up on the family farm harvesting rice herself and now with her partner Grant Lundie and her young family, she is hoping for the same for the next generation.

While the couple farm in conjunction with Sharni's parents Warwick and

Darryl Strong, and relatives Tim and Rebecca Strong, the couple purchased their own 121 ha irrigation property in 2017.

The purchase was all about finding their own way in the world of agriculture and a chance to start building up their own farming enterprise.

The farm was bought without permanent water and in their very first year they were able to grow rice after purchasing water on the temporary water market.

The following season temporary prices

skyrocketed but they were still able to grow a decent wheat crop on the fallow rice paddock using residual soil moisture, essentially, they got two crops out of one lot of irrigation water.

"One of the great things about growing rice is the follow-up crop. Rice gets a bad wrap; but it is often a forgotten point that we can grow dual crops.

"Rice also creates huge wetlands which in turn support significant bio-diversity including birds, frogs, reptiles and insects."

While growing rice is Sharni's passion,

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I am the next generation of farming. I have a young family of my own and I am excited for the opportunities irrigated agriculture can bring to our home, our community and the country





the couple and the family business have had to diversify to survive low water allocation years – which appears to be more common in recent times than she would like.

“Since 2000 we have had a 32 per cent reduction in our water reliability and for the past three years we have had zero, zero and a 3 per cent allocation; which makes running a business dependent on irrigation very difficult,” she said.

Buying-in store lambs, growing them out on stubble and finishing them off in a feedlot is one example of the couple’s diversification.

“We are young and energetic and are always looking at different income avenues. We are optimistic and we want our young family to have the opportunity to be farmers in the future and we hope growing rice remains part of that,” she said.

With affordable water, the family enterprise has the potential to produce vast amounts of crop, including 4500 tonnes of rice, 3000 tonnes of mixed crop and turn over 4000 lambs annually – along with running a busy contracting business.

This in turn generates in excess of \$3million, most of which is spent within the local community.

The business recently purchased a \$400,000 header from Finley’s Hutcheon and Pearce and upgraded the GPS system on another machine.

Branch manager Brendan Prentice said while the business has learnt to diversify away from irrigation, nothing generates wealth into the community like an irrigated cropping program.

“Our core business has adapted but we are missing the growth which comes to us from a strong winter and summer cropping program,” Brendan said.

He said southern Riverina farmers have the potential to grow three crops a year with access to water.

“For our business personally, this type of cropping program means farmers spend more time in their machinery, turn them over more frequently and access our service department more regularly.

“We then have to employ more people to keep up with the demand and our business can then spend more money locally, while continuing to support local sporting groups and other community-based groups through sponsorship.

“A strong and vibrant agricultural sector is a win for everyone,” Brendan said.

Sharni said farmers don’t want government handouts. nor do they want anything for free, they just want access to affordable irrigation water.

“As small business grows, job opportunities increase and health and education services remain in rural towns, the hairdresser might put on

an apprentice and the mechanic can keep his doors open,” Sharni said.

“If we have a good season we can keep the local spray guy in half his work just on our place alone, throw in the same scenario across other farms and all of a sudden there is an opportunity for someone else to start up their own business.

“Seriously, we have the potential to generate hundreds of millions of dollars just in our region alone if the government would just add water, instead of taking it away from us,” Warwick said.

For the previous two growing seasons the business has battled through on zero allocation.

Sharni said while drought has been hard, so has dealing with poor water policy and the effects of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

“We have had to diversify our business as water has moved out of our district and downstream into the deeper financial pockets of the overseas corporate investors – leave the water here, in the hands of Australian-owned family farms and watch our economy grow.

“I am the next generation of farming. I have a young family of my own and I am excited for the opportunities irrigated agriculture can bring to our home, our community and the country.”

Farming 2020 is all about *being light on your feet*

For one young southern Riverina farming couple, the water crisis has seen them taking their traditionally rice-based business into a more diverse and geographically spread enterprise to compensate for the lack of water, its soaring costs and their need for security. SOPHIE BALDWIN reports



WHEN it comes to farming, young Finley couple Scott and Anna Jewell, who farm with Scott's parents Jim and Deborah, are broadening their scope to include dryland cropping and livestock production alongside their irrigation farming activities to spread the risk.

Increasing uncertainty surrounding water allocation, and annual costs, are the main drivers behind the move; which the couple are hoping will take their third generation business well into the future.

Returning to the family farm six years ago, the couple found themselves in the thick of an above-average rice harvest. A winter cropping program kept them on their toes and so did the following year's rice harvest in 2015.

"It was a big first few years for us, returning home among a run of good seasons," Anna said.

But things haven't been so great in the past few years.

Little, or zero allocation, has seen rice fall away to be replaced by a summer crop of corn and as water allocations have dwindled, so has the couple's faith in the once strong irrigation sector.

"We are starting to look at irrigation as opportunistic, our focus is shifting towards making the most of what irrigation resources we have, modernising our assets rather

than expanding further in that field," Scott said.

Over the past six-year period the couple have had four summer crop harvests, which included three rice crops.

"Our farm was set up for rice but we are changing our model," he said.

Even though there is uncertainty surrounding irrigation, the couple remain positive about farming in general and their ability to take the business forward.

"We have changed to a winter crop and sheep program with the possibility of a summer crop if the opportunity is there.

"Dad previously ran rice, sheep and permanent pasture but we have modified that to a more flexible system that gives us more options, to a certain degree," he said.

"We have also bought land outside of this district with the aim of diversifying into another climatic region," Anna said.

That purchase has seen the couple try their hand at running a sheep farm down near Geelong. The sheep side of the operation has grown considerably in the past couple of years and has been boosted by the building of a 5000-head capacity feedlot.

"Our business has been into ewes, out of ewes and back into them and currently we are right into them, we keep adapting as each season comes

and we farm accordingly," Scott said. "We have a pretty good mix of irrigation and dryland now and that diversity gives us confidence, especially with the way water is going. We feel confident we have taken some of our focus and reliance away from irrigation."

While the couple ultimately make all their own choices, they do use the services of an independent consultant to help make some of their financial decisions.

"Fresh eyes help look outside the square and for us this has been critical," Anna said.

With their young daughter by their side, the couple, and Scott's father, do most of the work themselves but they do have plans to continue to grow even further.

"We feel we have the balance between irrigation, dryland and livestock about right now, but like everything we don't want to be left standing still, so we're always on the lookout for the next opportunity, whether that be broadacre cropping expansion or growing the livestock side of things in the future" Anna said.

Scott also said they love farming and working for themselves.

"With farming you are the master of your own destiny and I find the harder you work the more rewarding it is and the more we get out of it," he added.



A century of farming on the brink

One southern Riverina family has been anchored to its farming land for generations, but chaotic and crippling water policy has put all that at risk. SOPHIE BALDWIN reports on an uncertain future

WITH a century of farming in the district already under their belt, and three sons all looking for a career in agriculture, the Thomas family from Cambria have certainly got the next generation of family farming covered.

Traditionally running a mixed irrigation business, their 3000 ha farm in a good year can produce 2000 tonnes of rice, 3000 tonnes of cereal and support as many as 1000 ewes.

In some ways the family, Norm and Jan and sons Cameron, Anthony and Shaun, have, by default, diversified into a successful spraying, sowing and harvesting contracting business.

Shaun, the youngest of the Thomas

boys, said the journey into contracting began in 2017 to help supplement lost rice income.

"We started off doing a bit of harvesting outside the region on the back of reduced irrigation allocations. We had existing gear which was just sitting in the shed and we thought it still needs to be paid for, so we need to have it moving," Shaun said.

Over the ensuing years business has steadily grown to the point where the family is considering buying additional machinery.

While the family's first love is growing crops, the contracting side has been surprisingly beneficial.

Shaun said he has been able to pick

up ideas from other farmers doing small things differently, which in turn is boosting efficiency at home.

"Contracting has really helped reinvigorate my passion for farming and I often come home really refreshed. Things have been pretty tough over the last few years with little or no water allocation and getting out and working off farm has been great for my mindset," he said.

And this season things are certainly looking better.

The family took a gamble by sowing their biggest dryland crop—1400 ha of barley and 250 ha of oats.

"We decided to keep things simple and do it very well and with a growing



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We can deal with the exposure to the elements, it's all the red tape and bullshit that now goes with water that is making it all so hard.



season rainfall of 173 mm so far, our crops are looking really good. We only received 150 mm of rain last year for the whole calendar year so I would say this year is getting much closer to an average year.”

Accessing supplementary water has also seen a much-awaited return of migratory birds to the area along with an optimism not seen for a few years.

The announcement of an increase in general security allocation to 8 per cent, combined with lower temporary water prices, indicate there is a real possibility the family could be growing rice this year, a prospect that excites Shaun.

“We have set aside a couple of paddocks for this season. Growing rice is such a mental boost. It's a simple thing really but it rejuvenates the whole district and it just comes alive.”

The family are also proud of the fact whenever they grow rice it attracts vast numbers of wildlife.

Ecologist Matt Herring held a field day at Cambria, where 97 species of bird

were noted on the property during the growing and harvesting cycle of the rice crop.

Cambria has been home to the third largest sighting of painted snipes in Australia, as well as rare species including bitterns, magpie geese and spotted crakes.

No water means no rice and no micro-wetland for the birds and animals that this crop always supports.

“My father was an avid bird watcher and he passed his knowledge on to me,” Norm said.

“Before he passed away I was able to show him two things that had never been sighted on Cambria before – magpie geese and a black wallaby – and it was a huge thrill for both of us.”

The family might have decades of farming behind them, but poor water policy is crushing them and they worry instead of setting their family up for future generations, water could actually contribute to their demise.

“We have no idea what to budget for,

or even what a normal year is for us anymore,” Norm said.

An emotional Norm said Cambria meant everything to him.

“My father and his father's father, they have all had a crack and I would love my boys and their children to have the opportunity to farm here – over 100 years of farming in one place would be very hard to walk away from.

“We can deal with the exposure to the elements, it's all the red tape and bullshit that now goes with water that is making it all so hard.”

Both Norm and Jan ensured their boys obtained skills outside the farm but all have returned home.

Shaun like the generations before him just wants to continue farming.

“I want to make a life on the farm. Not only for me but for the children I hope to have one day. I want them to be able to have the same opportunities and freedom I have had growing up,” Shaun said.

Prime time to trade

SOPHIE BALDWIN meets a young couple determined to carve out a sustainable future in farming, not only for themselves but for their three young children as well.

IT'S a long time since Australia rode on the sheep's back; but the emergence of a market for prime lamb has created a new wave of success for sheep farmers Carly and Tom Marriott.

The couple, who farm outside Barooga, have incorporated lamb containment feeding into their farm management program to not only help finish off prime lambs at a bodyweight of around 53 kg, but also to help with the running of their cropping program.

"With sheep competing with the crops it has always been a bit of a balancing act, especially when we run a 50:50 split," Tom said.

The 10-pen area sits on 1.2 ha and has the capacity to hold 3000 head.

And it has an undercover automated feed system to help reduce labour, a concept Tom adapted from the dairy industry.

"We try to buy around 35–38 kg and we finish them for around eight weeks. The

first two weeks are an induction ration, followed by six weeks of full ration – we aim to put on around 2 kg a week," he said.

The lambs have access to ad-lib straw and grain and when the pens are cleaned out, the composted material is put out on the paddocks.

Tom said while there are many aspects to successful lamb finishing, including feeding rations and animal health, playing the market and locking in stock for efficient contract prices is also very important.

"We always try to know what we need and lock in half the lambs; and as it gets closer to selling we might lock in a few more if the price is looking good.

"We always like to build up numbers in a buyers' market and sell in a sellers' market but it doesn't always work out that way," he laughed.

The system is predominantly in use from January through to March because, as Tom said, there is no use

finishing off stock on grain when there is plenty of grass around.

The couple trade around as many as 12,000 lambs a year.

Two years ago they decided to start breeding lambs as well.

"We aim to breed around 3000 lambs a years and we are currently trading three lambs to every one we breed," he said.

Tom grew up on a family sheep farm at Benalla, where it was too wet for cropping, however since moving to Barooga to live with Carly, the pair agree a mixed enterprise is their best option.

The couple admit they follow a fairly standard cropping program growing clover, canola and cereal grain crop.

"We have structured our program to include a four-year pasture phase followed by a four-year cropping phase and every year, an eighth of the farm will go from pasture to crop," he said.

Both Carly and Tom have a goal to





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Irrigation dictates what we can do but we do try to grow everything ourselves. I am trying to get better at grass utilisation to make every dollar spent on water pay. We have also reduced our paddock size so they are suitable for both sheep and cropping

reduce their reliance on chemical usage and improve soil carbon.

“Farming sustainably is important to both of us as we balance farming with our family life,” Carly said.

It has also been a huge learning curve for Tom as he has had to work his way around irrigation and the complicated world of water policy.

“Irrigation dictates what we can do but we do try to grow everything ourselves. I am trying to get better at grass utilisation to make every dollar spent on water pay. We have also reduced our paddock size so they are suitable for both sheep and cropping,” he said.

Tom and Carly have achieved a lot

together since they were married five years ago, setting up their farm for their own future, while also rearing three future farmers Kate, 4, Jemima, 2 and Herbie 1.

The couple are currently in the process of buying two of the family farms from Carly’s parents Chris and Jan Brooks as part of the family succession plan.

They run their own farm business, Marriott Family alongside Brooks Farms. “Dad developed Brooklands from a dryland grazing farm to a 400 ha pivot irrigated block capable of growing corn. The farm was his great grandfathers land and the farm his dad, Ray Brooks, was raised on.”

Brooks Farms is a vertically integrated business owning grain sheds and working with related freight company, Brooks Logistics to assist with grain marketing and price fluctuations.

“There has been a shift towards more sustainable mixed farming practices, grazing paddocks instead of spraying, graze and grain and a lot more adaptability in our enterprises, so we can respond to the season proactively.

“We can now cut crops for hay or silage dependent on what is happening each season which is an important part of maintaining and running a flexible business that can take us well into the future,” Carly said.



DON'T LET THE DECLINE BECOME A COLLAPSE

Dairy farmers see potential of
rejuvenated southern Riverina





One dairy family moved to the southern Riverina from southern Queensland, attracted by the reliability and affordability of water. That dream fast became a nightmare and although they have successfully reinvented themselves they told SOPHIE BALDWIN the region can do much, much more – and everyone knows it

WHEN brothers Lachlan and Adam Marshall and Lachlan's wife Genevieve moved their dairy herd thousands of kilometres from south east Queensland to Blighty in the southern Riverina, their number one reason was reliability and affordability of water.

A close second was the potential of the region, climate and access to markets.

"We moved south with some of our Queensland herd to milk 400 cows seasonally in what we thought was a cheaper cost-of-production system based on grass," Lachlan said.

Fourteen years later it's a whole new ball game.

Grazing has gone, the herd has doubled in size and is now milked three times a day, while the cows spend their

days loafing in comfort in a 10 acre purpose built system, specifically built to feed the cows a TMR (total mixed ration).

The cows have access to shade, feed, and a comfortable loafing area while everything in the TMR is balanced to maximise the return on the amount of dry matter fed, while ensuring optimum health and production for the herd. "Our model is all about creating happy and contented cows and the by-product of that is increased milk production," Lachlan said.

Depending on their stage of lactation, the cows can be found in one of three herds – the high production herd, the low production herd or the first lactation herd.

Under the new system, production has increased from 2 kg of milk solids

per cow, per day, to 2.8 kg.

Interestingly the new system has also reduced the carbon footprint of the entire farm by a third, a huge achievement across 2000 acres and 800 cows – plus young stock.

And all the manure from the pens is periodically cleaned out and recycled back onto the paddocks as a major source of fertiliser; reducing carbon emissions by yet another third.

"We have moved totally away from grass and grow cereals, vetch and peas in autumn and spring. We save all our water to grow a summer crop of maize; which is the greatest return per megalitre. Through our selective cropping program we have managed to grow twice the amount of forage using half the amount of water," he said. >>>

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Dairy has the potential to be the rebirth of our local economy, it puts actual bums on seats in the community and people who spend money in our footprint, which in turn creates opportunity in our region. But none of this can happen without water security in the future. We need practical solutions and a political will to bring about meaningful change

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Lachlan said the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has decimated the region and reduced water security from an 87 per cent reliability when they first moved in 2006 to 52 per cent.

“We were told the Basin Plan would be adaptable and flexible and it has been none of those things. Poor management through the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and the insatiable demand for water downstream has killed our allocation and sent the Riverina to the wall, particularly the dairy industry,” he said.

Lachlan said when he first moved to the Riverina there were 90 dairy farmers—now there are only 20.

“The Murray-Dairy footprint (which includes northern Victoria) has seen a drop in production of 44 per cent from its peak, an enormous reduction which is affecting community and flowing through to business.”

According to Murray Dairy 2017–18 data, the Murray region generated a farmgate value of \$916 million, producing 2064 million litres of milk (22 per cent of the national total). A further \$730 million of economic contribution was injected into regional communities. Dairy is the leading employer within agriculture, employing 8700 people on-farm, in regional processing and within the broader service sector.

The Marshall family business itself employs 20 people, that’s 20 people who go out and spend in the local community, some might have families with kids at school while others might support a local sporting group.



“We employ 20 people and when you multiply that, the flow on figure soon becomes 200 people who rely on the viability of my operation alone – one business. Dairy has the potential to be the rebirth of our local economy, it puts actual bums on seats in the community and people who spend money in our footprint, which in turn creates opportunity in our region.

“But none of this can happen without water security in the future. We need practical solutions and a political will to bring about meaningful change.”

Lachlan said solutions such as recognising and respecting the natural constraints of the river and stopping overbank flows are just the start not to mention the impact of flood plain harvesting in the north.

“We need recognition of environmental damage created by pushing large volumes of water downstream, the bank slumping, silting and trees falling into the river.

He said recognition of historical flows and contribution by the Darling River to the river system is also critical.

“The illegal taking of water through floodplain harvesting in the north is affecting flows down the Darling River. The Darling is meant to contribute 39 per cent of the 1850 GI required at the South Australian border through the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement and when it is off-line, the shortfall must be made from NSW and Vic allocations.

“Engineering solutions like redirecting of the fresh water drains back into the Coorong, Lock Zero, automation of the

barrages, the Lower Lakes and a pipe delivery of water to South Australian farmers are all practical solutions that would create enough water savings to see a return of water allocation upstream while guaranteeing a 100 per cent allocation to SA.”

Lachlan firmly believes the potential of the region is positive but current poor water policy and management is decimating the country’s food bowl.

“There remains an incredible opportunity for agriculture in this region – affordable land, irrigation infrastructure and access to markets, services and a great climate but it all comes back to access to reliable and affordable water, but water remains the key,” he said.



Straight out of farming's coaching manual

Everyone is paying the price of COVID-19; but once again citycentric Australia and its mainstream media focus on what's happening in the concrete canyons. And if they want water, all they have to do is turn a tap on. In the bush that hurts. **CARLY MARRIOTT reports**

DAMIAN Sexton wears a football training singlet under his work shirt, celebrating his past and present; his two great passions – football and farming.

The ex-AFL player and local coach runs a tight ship; he is fit, his property is neat and he values, indeed expects, discipline and dedication on the farm and the playing field.

If you believe the rumours Damian owns a serious chunk of land and water outside Finley, but if you ask the man himself; he'll just brush it aside; focusing on what he thinks is important.

"If you work bloody hard, you get ahead. In farming, you need to gain an edge and do something others can't; and for us, that's rice. But we can't do it either without water," he said.

Damian is measured when he speaks, but you can detect the annoyance that runs deep as he explained: "We let outside players, water speculators, into our traditionally strong irrigation district, and they've got their hands on our water and now they're pulling punches that affect our family businesses".

Since the late 1980s Damian has been



working on the family farm with his wife Di, who hails from an Angus Stud near Henty.

Their four children, Molly, Courtney, Jack and Will, are the third generation to call Villa home but they have all but flown the nest, their youngest currently in isolation at boarding school in Melbourne.

The family, staunch rice industry loyalists, also grow winter crops such as wheat, barley and canola and run commercial livestock – Angus and crossbred sheep.

"We are diverse for a reason, we can maintain the workload and we can deal with external factors with this mix," Damian explained.

He considers his staff an integral part

of the operation and you can see his coaching expertise easily translates to motivational human resource management.

"You have to respect your workers, don't ask them to do something you wouldn't do. Thankfully I have good, stable employees I can rely on – and they can rely on me," he added.

To live life as an irrigation farmer within the MIL network, Damian believes you need mental strength above all else and it becomes clear he has it in spades.

"We need some positivity in rice, we recently got a very small allocation, about 5 per cent, we have a bit of carryover, it would be great to get back into it. Don't tell me what I can't do, let's



talk about what I can do.”

Improvements in rice farming have meant one person can now grow a lot of food from less water.

“If you want to see efficient irrigation, come to the southern Riverina. Every drop of water is gold, gone are the days when you could use as much water as your wheel could spin, today there is no waste.”

The couple recall the beauty of their rice crop, how in the middle of summer, with 40C-plus days they could drive to the rice and it would do wonders for them and their environment.

“It’s the same feeling when you come home to green lawn around the house,” Di said of the beautiful garden that envelops their home.

With their shared resilience it is little wonder the Sextons have built a successful business; but even they have their limits when it comes to overcoming the challenges created by

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If you want to see efficient irrigation, come to the southern Riverina. Every drop of water is gold, gone are the days when you could use as much water as your wheel could spin, today there is no waste

water policy.

“In Melbourne people are paying rent on commercial premises they can’t use because of COVID-19, I can sympathise with them, because here we are paying a lot of money for a resource we can’t access either,” Damian said.

“You don’t want to see hardships anywhere, but why is their hardship so well reported and understood and somehow ours means less to the general public?” Di said.

While 2020 has been considered an economic train wreck because of COVID-19, however Mother Nature has delivered perfect rainfall for the growing season at Villa.

“This year has saved us, the past two seasons, with no rain and no allocation have really hurt. You can tolerate a crop dying, that’s economic pain, but seeing livestock suffer in poor condition hurts you,” Damian added, reminding you farmers genuinely care for animals.

In true coaching fashion, Damian focuses on the strengths of the region, living by his motto that positivity creates positivity.

“You cannot drive around this district and see many farms who aren’t well setup. There are good operators here and they want to stay here – but we need water.”





THE GROWING BAXTER FAMILY JUST KEEPS ON TRUCKING

With nearly 100 years of southern Riverina farming history behind them; the burgeoning Baxter business is a prime example of what you can achieve with planning, drive and, when you cover four irrigation networks. CARLY MARRIOTT

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If we have to compete for water with permanent plantings then we will sell our water—we are forced to become water traders when we can't compete in the market



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KEL Baxter might be the man behind a fleet of 40 trucks and holdings of 25,000 acres of farmland just outside of Berrigan, but he still wears his slippers inside his transport office and sums up his life's work as "just a bit of farming and running a few trucks".

He is also a well-respected and knowledgeable voice within the world of water politics—and was founding chairman of Murray Irrigation Limited.

Kel smiles as he thinks back to the early days.

"I learnt to ski on the pristine waters of the Barmah Choke and I married Marilyn, who was the new hairdresser in town. I started my business career with one truck and that was second hand," he laughed.

Today nearing his 70th birthday, Kel continues to work, alongside two of his three sons, running the family business and there are still no immediate signs of slowing down.

The business employs a large staff including 40 truck drivers, 20 sub-contractors, 10 farm workers and a dozen office, logistics and mechanical staff and even in the short time it takes Kel to have a cup of coffee his phone (on silent) buzzes more than it doesn't; showing he is still very much an integral part of day-to-day operations.

Sons Glen and Noel run the family farms Colombo at Jerilderie and Namarang at Berrigan.

They both studied farm management at Orange Agricultural College and both conveniently found wives while

they were there and they too play an integral role in the business.

Working closely with IK Caldwell they have benefited from overseas study trips to learn more about cropping technologies and advances in the US and Europe.

They might be forward thinking—and planning—but in 2022, the Baxter family will have been farming at Namarang for 100 years.

Their great grandfather, who purchased the original block, would struggle to comprehend the farming footprint, which now extends across four irrigation networks including West Cororgan, Coleambally Irrigation Co-Operative Limited, Murray Irrigation Limited and Colombo Creek River Pumpers, not to mention the current



back-to-back summer/winter cropping rotation and the state-of-the-art irrigation infrastructure.

Two thirds of the land is irrigated by a combination of spray, flood, border check and beds for summer cropping as well as a new pontoon, through the bank system, while the remaining third is dry land.

In winter they grow around 3000 ha of wheat, 3000 ha of canola and 1000 ha of barley plus some faba beans.

The summer program includes 1000 ha of maize and 700 ha of cotton; which are heavily dependent on a water allocation.

In 2019, with a zero water allocation, the Baxters were forced to purchase temporary water to grow their summer crops; and judging by the strained

facial expressions on Noel and Kel as they recall the season, it was a stressful time for all involved.

Noel explained their highest return crop is an irrigated winter one.

"If we have to compete for water with permanent plantings then we will sell our water – we are forced to become water traders when we can't compete in the market," Noel added.

He is well positioned to represent MIL shareholders as a grower director and you could only hazard a guess at how many hours the family spend discussing the water debate unravelling across the Murray-Darling Basin and through State and Federal parliaments.

When it comes right down to what can be achieved with hard work

and dedication; this is the southern Riverina's pin-up family.

"You create a good set of circumstances, add water and watch it all grow," Noel said.

And while there is no doubt the trademark maroon Baxter trucks will keep traversing the eastern seaboard; and their mammoth cropping program will continue in some form or another well into the next generation, it isn't without its challenges – and most of those stem from water availability.

As a man who has seen and survived battles within his business and industry, when Kel offers up some sage words it is definitely worth listening: "Adaptable is what we are and what we have to be.

At Modbury *it's the* brother act

Growing up on a farm, graduating from Longerenong and full of get up and go, Duncan and Dudley Bibby are tackling their future head on and they have plenty of ideas — theirs and those of others — to help them get it right. CARLY MARRIOTT reports

THE Bibby Brothers are the definition of manpower, they are in their own words, “stronger together” both physically and mentally.

So it is little wonder their dad Derek, with the blessing of their mum Robyn, “threw them the keys” to the farm when they came home after attending Longerenong Agricultural College and told them to “go their hardest.”

And they did, splitting their specialities of cropping and wool across 3000 acres at Wakool and a further 1000 acres at Donald.

Dudley, 25, is the cropper, committed to his machinery and the annual challenge of growing a mix of wheat, barley, oats, rice, vetch, pastures and hay.

While big brother Duncan, 27, is a Merino man; entranced by genetics and the search for the wool industry’s holy grail — more wool, bringing down the micron and increasing the cut per sheep on an animal that will not just survive but also thrive.

A quest that takes the boys to Sheepvention in Hamilton and the Australian Sheep and Wool Show in Bendigo each year with their Modbury Merino stud.

They manage their resources well, machines, animals, labour and soil and they are forever grateful technology has allowed them access to communication, education and

stimulation for their very open minds.

Dudley believes the internet has changed farming forever.

“Look at AuctionsPlus, selling livestock without going to the yards, it blows you away. And Facebook really does connect people, we are part of a Lamb Feedlotter’s page and it’s amazing to see farmers sharing ideas, wins and losses, so we can all become better operators together.”

The brothers come armed with a bullish attitude towards their future in agriculture and see there are gains to be made by utilising electronic identification (EID) technology within the sheep operation.

“If we can retain lambing percentages, fleece weights and genetic history, we can make the Merino stud more profitable. It’s exciting to think what is possible if you invest in learning.”

One of their fraternal powers is their ability to listen to each other — and to others.

Dudley recalls some of the best years of his life working off-farm as a windrower and baling contractor.

“I got out and saw the country, especially around the Mallee; and you learn so much from just listening and seeing what other blokes do.”

This gathering of information has led to good decision making and the Bibby Brothers now run a sheep containment feeding operation that is a great fit for

their combined production system.

“Given the seasons we have had in 2018 and 2019 we decided to start containment feeding and we are getting more efficient with feed bunks, we’re always finding new ways of doing things, whether it’s a different feed ration or better husbandry techniques, you just have to keep your eyes and ears open,” Dudley said.

The modus operandi of the Bibby Family is that if you want something done, you had better do it yourself — apart from shearing they keep labour in-house.

Determined to fully utilise machinery and every one of the available 24 hours in the day, the boys have added another string to their bow — they now also work as contract harvesters, spreaders and freight operators.

You get the sense there is little down time for these hard-working siblings and it must run in the family with older sisters Camille (a lawyer) and Claire, the apprenticeships co-ordinator at Longerenong.

With youth on their side the Bibby Brothers have the enthusiasm and ability to keep building on what their parents have created — regardless of water policy or the season.

“As long as they’re still printing money somewhere, we will keep expanding,” Dudley laughed.



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Look at AuctionsPlus, selling livestock without going to the yards, it blows you away. And Facebook really does connect people, we are part of a Lamb Feedlotter's page and it's amazing to see farmers sharing ideas, wins and losses, so we can all become better operators together

Kate's a genuine
GOOD EGG



Running her own expanding egg enterprise is not slowing one southern Riverina farmer from expanding her workload to help establish a regional food network and marketing brand according to writer CARLY MARRIOTT >>>





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KATE Redfearn is a good egg; a Moulamein chick who flew the coop to broaden her horizons before becoming Mother Hen to three-year-old Henry.

Kate is a champion for fellow artisan food producers and owner of the commercial egg and hen business, 12 Good Eggs.

In true female fashion Kate is multitasking because what started as a side hustle matured quickly into a hard-boiled business.

The Barham-based enterprise came up for sale six years ago and Kate saw an opportunity to combine her love of the land with her sales and marketing expertise.

Today Kate is busily adapting her business to rely less on farmers' markets and more on an online outlet to enable her dependable freight network to continue to cart fresh Riverina eggs across the country.

12 Good Eggs are today found as far afield as Melbourne and Sydney as well as all throughout the Murray Region, as far east as Albury and as west as Swan Hill.

In the relaxed pre-COVID-19 days yolk lovers would queue to buy the highly coveted cartons of double yolkers – and a longer line would form to pick up her 12 month old 'backyarder' hens.

Are these eggs free range you ask?

They are beyond free range; way beyond. Kate's eggs are paddock eggs. "Industry standard defines free range as 10,000 hens/ha whereas we have 150 hens/ha," she explained.

Thanks to the watchful eye of the inherited Italian Maremma dogs, these girls freely roam the banks of the Edward River, safe from predators.

"I can count on one hand how many fox attacks we've had in six years; the dogs do a fantastic job," she added.

The quality of life enjoyed by her hens and the dogs also extends to young Henry and his cousins – the self-





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Once we collect the eggs on the farm at Moulamein, we cart them to the factory in Barham where they undergo candling, which involves a bright light showing up any cracks or imperfections within the egg. They are then sanitised with a food grade sanitiser, stamped, weighed and graded into cartons



appointed (albeit unofficial) quality control officers during the daily egg collection.

As an added measure, the eggs undergo a thorough grading process to ensure nothing but the best products are being served sunny side up.

“Once we collect the eggs on the farm at Moulamein, we cart them to the factory in Barham where they undergo candling, which involves a bright light showing up any cracks or imperfections within the egg. They

are then sanitised with a food grade sanitiser, stamped, weighed and graded into cartons,” Kate explained.

As the name suggests, each carton includes 12 Good Eggs, so product quality is essential.

“We turn the hens over after 12 months; mostly because their rate of production decreases, we are feeding very hungry creatures, so we need them to be laying reliably.

“And secondly and most importantly, to the trained eye, the egg quality deteriorates. The whites are runnier, and the yolks are not as firm. They still taste great but if a chef wants to poach an egg then it needs to look perfect.”

This high standard of production is

reinforced by the beautiful website Kate created, www.12goodeggs.farm and the ever-essential management of her social media presence.

The story of her farm is one that sits well with her customers as society becomes more aware of, and interested in, the provenance of their meal.

Kate has banded together with other local food producers to work towards creating a food network and regional brand.

Ever the loyal Moulamein girl, Kate is happy to promote the area because she genuinely loves it and is grateful for the happiness and balance it has provided for her and her family.

From the SRI Table

Chef Antonio Zardo was raised in the granite belt of Queensland surrounded by an Italian family and the comfort of the kitchen.

Moving to the Southern Riverina with his partner Stephen Brooks, Antonio was inspired to create this beautiful meal by his love of Tuscany.

Using locally sourced ingredients including lamb, pork, mushrooms, potatoes, rice and a strong dairy influence, Antonio created a feast fit for a king.

“Colours textures and flavours, you must have fresh produce if you want it to sing,” he said.

And soon there will be pomegranates to add to the table as the couple are in the process of establishing their own business, Murray River Pomegranates.





Bushies helping to save the Bush Stone-Curlew

Farmers are, by and large, environmentalists by default – and they love it. SOPHIE BALDWIN caught up with one southern Riverina mixed farmer who has mixed his business with a program to rescue the vanishing Bush Stone-Curlew



ACCORDING to Peter Redfearn; a financially poor farmer results in a poor environment.

And there just might be a thing or two in that.

Based south of Moulamein, Peter runs a 9000-acre sheep and grazing property, but unlike many others, 50 per cent of his property is devoted to remnant vegetation.

It is also home to two, fenced in vermin proof enclosures, instrumental in returning the natural population of Bush Stone-Curlew back into the area.

Peter has always had a deep love for the environment which he inherited from his father and uncles.

Some of his earliest memories are of sitting in the open cab of the tractor working away on the farm while watching the birds fly overhead.

He has always believed farming and nature conversation can run hand in hand, in fact his family have been doing it for decades.

"Part of the enjoyment of living in the bush is the natural world. Not a lot of people take notice of the environment around them, but farmers do," Peter said.

The Curlew had always been part of the Redfearn family farm environment; with Peter's dad sneaking up behind them and taking pictures of them back in the 1960s.

But much to his despair Peter saw the last pair disappear from his property in 2002 (Curlews nest on the ground and are easy pickings for foxes, which decimated the local population).

Soon after talking to others in the area Peter discovered many farmers 'used' to have a pair of Curlews on their property as well.

Around the same time he also

received a survey from The Nature Conversation Working Group (NCWG) which prompted a trip to Albury.

Suffice to say the meeting didn't go as planned as Peter found both the science world and natural resource managers reluctant to work alongside farmers.

His proposal for a captive breeding program and a soft release site, which allowed the birds to gain real world knowledge before being released, was largely laughed at – the academics of the time much preferred a talk fest approach with no action.

However Peter was fortunate to meet Neville and Jan Lubke; who also shared the same passion for the Curlew and together with the NCWG they set about making a real difference.

That difference included the establishment of two vermin-proof sites of 18 acres and 50 acres on their respective properties – a breeding site and a soft release site.

The 2m fencing was electrified to keep foxes and cats out and plenty of time and effort was put into managing feral animal populations.

"It was a lot of work and cost me plenty but I did get a bit of government money – and MIL put some in as well," Peter said.

Peter, Neville and Jan managed to source breeding birds and together they set about making a real difference.

Peter said to successfully breed a bird you must understand the process and many releases fail because of inadequate bird preparation.

Peter would move his birds from the breeding aviary at full size weaning around 65–70 days.

Placed in a large aviary inside the soft release area, the young birds were able to establish themselves as a flock while exposed to real life events.

The soft release area had large trees and was close to the creek so the young Curlews could learn the alarm calls of other birds and also be taught to forage for food – although the 'authorities' did their best to continue to put hurdles before us.

"We had breeding birds but the authorities stated we didn't know the provenance of the birds they bred from. There was a theory there was a northern and a southern species and this delayed our release as we had to get a DNA test at a cost of around \$30,000," Peter explained.

"Samples were taken of the southern and northern Curlews and they soon revealed they are the same, the minor physical differences are attributed to environmental conditions and nothing to do with genetics."

Next came requests for faecal samples, blood test, registered bands and radio trackers fitted, all quite intrusive and unsettling for the birds.

Peter said if it wasn't for Jan and her dogged persistence, he would have given up but eventually the birds were released and on the first night Peter found a Curlew with a blind snake in its mouth on the sand hill.

And so the wild population began clawing its way back.

"The adaptation was fantastic and it really was quite amazing. The first release was during the height of the millennium drought and through



radio tracking we found Curlews up in the Dillion bush country miles away.”

As the trio began to release more and more birds, one wildlife bureaucrat had the audacity to suggest their efforts might result in an overpopulation while another said the birds could perch in trees to escape predators.

“Comments like this again show a lack of understanding and what we had to deal with,” Peter said.

The Curlew has no inclination to roost on anything but the ground,” he said.

And while Peter would love to say the condescending attitude amongst academics and politicians has disappeared over time, he said farmers are still experiencing arrogance and disdain and it is creeping more and more into their work.

“These people do a lot of talking but in most cases fail to deliver. I think there are more farmers interested in wildlife than the general population — they live and breathe the bush.”

To date more than 60 birds have been released back into the wild and while Peter is no longer captively breeding, he has stumbled across three nests within 600m of his house — a source of considerable joy.

“This project required a lot of hard work, commitment and assistance. Advice has been willingly provided by many helpful people and I need to acknowledge the Murray CMA, NSW Environmental Trust, Murray Irrigation and especially the members of the Nature Conservation Working Group for their commitment and support throughout.

“Some people might say ‘a Bush Stone-Curlew, so what?’ but these all have a purpose and are all part of the natural equation,” he said.

Adaptability

— it's been a
stunning solution

CARLY MARRIOTT talks about an Italian migrant who arrived here 60 years ago and because he wanted to grow tomatoes, not wool, he was mocked. Well, 60 years down the track, and a couple more generations, the only ones laughing now are his children and grandchildren

GLENN Rorato describes his late father Sergio, who died earlier this year, as someone who “hated waste and always had something on the go”.

When the proud Italian migrant arrived in Australia in the 1960s he was told he was mad for turning Merino country at Jerilderie into a tomato farm.

Later he was instructed by tomato processors to plough in thousands of tonnes of crop they didn't want to buy as he had already filled his contract.

Sergio took matters into his own hands, expanding his tomato production and going to Italy to buy a tomato processing factory so he could pack his excess product.

As the crop ripened under the scorching Riverina sun, the family built a large shed to house the newly arrived manufacturing plant that was simultaneously being erected by Italian technicians.

Sergio, by all accounts, did not waste any time achieving his life's goal of farming with his family to produce high quality food.

Originally the Rorato Brothers, Robert, Sergio and Luciano made the bold move from Griffith to Jerilderie and worked together trialling all manner of fruit and vegetable production; including carrots, watermelon, onions and pumpkins.

Luciano decided early on that

engineering was his career of choice and he established East End Welding in Jerilderie. More recently he has started growing olives for quality olive oil under his brand of Olive Oil of Australia.

If entrepreneurship is genetic, then the Roratos are carriers.

Sergio's legacy continues as Glenn, Sandra and Allan, three of his four children, run the tomato farm and factory, Billabong Produce.

Glenn explained why tomatoes have remained a staple product: “They are a high value crop in terms of \$/ML return, they're well suited to our clay soils and they yield well in this climate. We now farm cotton, corn and tomatoes on a mix of pontoon irrigation and 900 ha of drip irrigation. We also grow 4000 ha of winter dryland crops”.

During the six-week tomato harvest that starts in February, the family employs 50 people to run the factory 24/7 with three eight-hour shifts, plus eight fulltime farm staff, six people on tomato harvesters and two truck drivers.

Running this intensive mix of crops doesn't leave a lot of wriggle room on the calendar but in true Rorato fashion, resources are fully utilised.

Water, the holy grail, is no exception; with the Roratos moving from flood irrigation (where they grew 40t/ha from 6ML/ha) to drip irrigation (which produces 80t/ha from 4.5ML/ha). >>>







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When water is flowing you think everything is going OK. But whatever is happening with the politics, this mismanagement of water, it affects our family, our staff, their families, we need water in this region

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It pains Glenn to see government wasting a precious commodity such as water after users like himself do everything to save it.

In 2006, with the reassurance of being well known and trusted in the food service sector in Melbourne, the Roratos stopped supplying the canneries and put their whole crop into their own packing plant.

As they made this move, bad water policy played havoc with water access, threatening their ability to keep their tomato products up to their clients.

Strategic as always, the Roratos leased a block at Narrandera (with bores) and carried on—business as usual.

In fact, what seemed like a setback turned out to be a great opportunity for the Roratos as it led them to growing cotton.

Tomatoes and cotton have similar

machinery requirements, such as bed formers and planters, with the only added cost being the hire of a cotton picker.

The cotton enterprise cemented itself within the business and when they moved the farming operation back to Jerilderie after the lease finished at Narrandera, and assuming the water issue was fixed, they brought back cotton.

Glenn remembers Sergio cutting a deal.

“We went up to this cotton farm and dad said ‘what do I need to harvest my cotton?’ And then he bought the lot for a bargain. We actually had to learn how to drive the cotton pickers as we brought them home.”

Ever the pioneers, the Roratos were originally delivering cotton to Auscott in Trangie, 400 km to the north, so they

joined other southern cotton producers to establish RivCott.

Glenn Rorato is still one of the six founding directors of the cotton gin based at Carathool—and like his father has brushed off the naysayers who told him you couldn’t grow cotton this far south.

The Roratos have been defying the cynics and critics for generations and the locals who once laughed at the Italian tending tomatoes near the banks of the Billabong Creek would be amazed to know the vegetable farm now produces around 10,000 tonnes of fresh tomatoes every year.

The Billabong Produce brand, originally printed humbly on cardboard boxes, now leaves the factory daily by the truckload on tins of tomato puree and across bottles of tomato sauce destined for restaurants and supermarkets alike.



The family has perfected three pasta sauces, Eggplant, Sylvia's and Crushed with Basil, as well as tomato puree, chunky tomato and crushed tomato.

Sylvia Rorato, the Nonna behind the most popular brand 'Sylvia's Traditional Pasta Sauce', still lives on the farm in a house that was deliberately built, "on the worst soils we have," laughs Glenn.

"Dad said you can't waste good soil; and he meant it."

How does one go about commercialising their Mum's pasta sauce? "We just stole Mum's recipe, it's the best there is," said Glenn confidently.

If you are wondering whether the Roratos celebrate a traditional 'Italian tomato day,' Sandra will confirm, 'no, no, we just go into the factory and grab a box of sauce, it's easier, it's delicious and there's no fighting,' she laughed.

Sandra, who runs the office and

deals with supply contracts, points out COVID-19 has woken both consumers and wholesalers.

"We supply a major supermarket chain in Victoria, but because of import restrictions, we will soon provide tomato products for their stores in NSW and SA regions, tripling the demand for our bottled products but we are seeing a downturn in the food service sector; which has decreased demand for our tinned products."

Quick on their feet, a skill inherited from Sergio, the Roratos will adapt but admit there are a lot of variables at play, especially considering they order their tomato bottles months in advance from Italy.

Although adaptability does seem to be the backbone of this family operation.

Allan remembers when the price of fresh onions had dropped, his dad

purchased an onion peeling machine and sold the value-added product at a premium to Edgells and Rosella.

Sandra recalls when they dried tomatoes on large racks to supply David Jones — before cheap imports replaced their product.

Every time the business overcomes a barrier it not only recovers but often gains momentum in their solution.

The siblings look at the water industry as something that needs fixing.

"When water is flowing you think everything is going OK. But whatever is happening with the politics, this mismanagement of water, it affects our family, our staff, their families, we need water in this region.

"If dad was alive I think he would be leading the next protest to fight for our water and our right to grow food."



This couple knew spuds were a sure thing

A shearer and accountant turned farmers reckon they have found the perfect place to build a business, build a home and build an exciting future. CARLY MARRIOTT caught up with them to get the story of North Windmill Ag

TOM Kelly might have spent his formative years shearing out of Hillston but he spent most of his time thinking about how he could do what he really loved – be a farmer.

Thinking time clearly not wasted as he and wife Hannah now produce 6500t of crisper potatoes a year on their 350 ha farm at Tocumwal – along with cereals and a few sheep.

But there is a connection between those early shearing days and now growing potatoes.

They're both hard work – and a lot of it.

Still, if it was easy then everyone would probably be doing it.

"Most months of the year we're digging or planting spuds and when we're not doing that, we're spraying or spreading," Tom said.

The couple began their farming enterprise, North Windmill Ag, after attending university in Melbourne where Tom pursued a Bachelor of Agricultural Science and Hannah a Bachelor of Business (Accounting).

After returning to the southern Riverina in 2012, Tom spent three years working for his in-laws, John and Maree Doyle, on their potato farm while Hannah established a bookkeeping business and gained her BAS accreditation.

After trying their hand at rice and winter cropping, the Kellys "dabbled in spuds," according to Tom.

"It was clear that water was going to become an issue when we moved home in 2012. It's no accident that we diversified into higher return per megalitre crops."

Initially the pair leased country and slowly built up the relationships and specialised equipment needed to grow such a niche crop.

They have now grown potatoes for five years using wheat and canola as break crops.

When it comes to spud farming



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It was clear that water was going to become an issue when we moved home in 2012. It's no accident that we diversified into higher return per megalitre crops

location is all important because potatoes need sandy soils and overhead irrigation.

Tocumwal is strategically positioned, with relatively close proximity to potato factories and good access for freight companies, being above the Barmah Choke helps with water security and being close to the eastern seaboard assists with marketing.

Freight is a major component of the business, with the equivalent of nearly 200 B-Double truck loads coming or going to their property each year.

Growing potatoes has a positive flow-on effect for local communities; with the operation requiring three full-time labour units and five casual staff during peak periods.

As expected, this is a high risk, high-return industry and the lead time on a potato crop can be as much as

four years once you factor in the seed potato production.

“Seed is by far our biggest input; we deal with seed growers from as far south as Tasmania and in the opposite direction we reach Charters Towers in Queensland; and matching this with demand and a variable water price is our biggest challenge,” he said.

Tom and Hannah have two children, Meg, 4 and Henry, 2 and the family love where they live.

“There are so many people our age who have moved home, started families and businesses, it's a great area. There is opportunity here for us, we are surrounded by good towns. We just need water,” Hannah said.

Horticultural farms are beginning to buy up land above the Barmah Choke near the Kelly's farm.

Hannah and Tom see this as

inevitable, while there is added competition for sandy soils the true value of sandy soil in good climate and the security of being able to access water above the Choke is being reflected.

The Kelly's are happy to see more investment in the district as it increases the viability of the community in which they live.

The Australian potato industry is a small one and the focus is on quality.

Tom and Hannah have worked hard to secure and deliver on good contracts despite the challenges they have faced in the shape of drought and water policy mismanagement.

With the couple planting their family's roots at Tocumwal – as well as their potatoes on their farm – North Windmill Ag is clearly a growing business with an exciting future.

Persimmons, potential and big plans

CARLY MARRIOTT writes a fifth-generation farming family with its own take on production is proving its point when it comes to unlocking the potential of the southern Riverina.

WHEN Chris Stillard looks around the southern Riverina all he can see is potential.

And if there's one thing this innovative lateral thinker knows, it's that the region's potential still has a long way to go.

As a fifth-generation farmer Chris has the land in his DNA and he and wife Belinda are already working it with the sixth generation in mind – for their children Isobella, Grace and Sam.

The Stillard family has always farmed at the cutting edge of individuality, with Chris's uncle Bruce realising the potential of a persimmon plantation some 30 years ago.

"He said to me they would be a high value crop to grow and he was right," Chris said.

Today Chris and his family intensively farm just 115ha of irrigated country at Barooga and right now grow those persimmons alongside lambs and lucerne that gets watered mid-winter if needed – the installation and use of soil moisture monitors have been critical to water management.

Chris is the first to admit he's not like other farmers.



"Most blokes around here want more land, they want to be bigger, grow more crops, get bigger machinery, but my background and passion is horticulture and that's where the future of this farm lies."

Like his family before him, first and foremost Chris relies on his own technological research rather than assumed





best practice; and that too has been paying off.

“People said I was mad watering lucerne in winter, but the moisture sensors told me the crop was thirsty—and I listened. So I watered it, and turned a 12t/ha crop into a 20t/ha crop.”

The performance of a well irrigated lucerne crop is a prime example of how crucial water is to his operation—and

the greater district.

It is why he sits on the Water Taskforce for NSW Farmers and explains southern Riverina irrigators are “getting the rough end of the pineapple when it comes to water politics”.

But he remains an optimist, he’s open-minded—and he is a massive fan of this region.

He passionately lists the advantages of farming within the Murray Irrigation

network; best water savings, best soils, close to dams, located on Asia’s doorstep, best infrastructure and road networks.

Chris believes Riverina farmers are fiercely independent operators, he certainly is, but also recognises “this attitude may be doing us a disservice because we don’t educate the urban population, we just want to be left alone to farm and produce food”. >>>



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When I’m pruning the persimmons,
I listen to podcasts and try and
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to irrigation farming think. You
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process, then you can point out the
holes in their arguments





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The water debate is now public property and whether Chris likes it or not, he is having conversations around water policy with all walks of life.

“When I’m pruning the persimmons, I listen to podcasts and try and learn how people who are opposed to irrigation farming think,” he explained.

“You need to understand their thought process, then you can point out the holes in their arguments.”

As the latest in a long, proud line of Stillards, Chris is understandably protective of his family’s right to produce food.

Irrigation came to the property in the late 1940s, creating a boom for his grandfather.

Through the years the family has grown sheep, grain, cattle, lucerne, tobacco and processing tomatoes.

And just the merest suggestion of tomatoes still makes Chris wishful he was still growing them.

“The thing about tomatoes is they change—every day. They grow, they’re all-consuming, but you just love it.”

Chris only moved out of tomatoes, so very reluctantly, when Heinz withdrew from the Australian market and as a small scale producer he was unable to secure another contract.

He explained that in 1989 there were 110 growers in Australia; today there are only six.

But he didn’t lose out completely because he preserved their subsurface drip irrigation technology and buried it to grow his bumper lucerne crops.

His property now includes subsurface drip, pivot, pipe and rises and mini sprinklers on his 6 ha orchard.

Six hectares of the farm produce as many as 100 tonnes of persimmons a year which is still nowhere near enough to satisfy an insatiable market demand. There are plans afoot to expand the current 5000-tree orchard to 7000 over the next few years.

The family picks and packs their own product, with the help of 15 staff members.

Stock is sold to the Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane markets and around 5 per cent of the yield is exported to Malaysia and Singapore.

Chris has found a home for the smaller graded fruit not popular here but in demand there and in markets across the Middle East; he simply cannot supply enough of this high value product just as he cannot emphasise enough how bright the future is for this region.

In keeping with the family mantra, he has done his research and the Stillards and the southern Riverina are here for the long haul.

They're Wright but the system is all wrong

This proven family of farmers brought a track record of gold-plated success to the southern Riverina for one overriding reason – security of water. CARLY MARRIOTT said when they arrived at Barooga in 2001 they even had 1000 megalitres of permanent water thrown in as a virtual freebie. Now they have to pay for water they don't even get

WRIGHT Farming values water security, love to grow crops and have farmed from one end of the country to the other.

From their early days of dairying in Gippsland to clearing scrub and cropping in central Queensland, the family business has chosen to settle in Barooga, where three generations are now planning a successful cropping future.

Brett and Jo Wright work alongside their son Josh, 26, his partner Ash Rafferty, 25, and their son Lincoln, 1.

This year they have sown approximately 1300 ha of winter crop across their farms at Barooga and Jerilderie as well as two share blocks at Lalaly and Boomanoomana.

Their rotation includes oats, canola, wheat and barley and while 400 ha of the land is laid out to flood irrigation, they run their operation with a dryland mindset.

However water security within the region is never far from Brett's mind. "I just don't have confidence in general security water anymore," he said.

Thinking outside the square and looking for different opportunities has always been part of the Wright family mindset.

Brett's father Ray, built the first rotary dairy in Gippsland but always dreamt of crop farming, even hitch hiking to Donald to drive headers.

In 1989 the family headed north when there was an opportunity to buy 15,000 acres of scrubland between Rockhampton and Mackay for \$45/acre.

Jo understatedly said 'it was tough work clearing the land and cropping the block' but the move paid off and 15 years later they sold the lot for \$1000/acre.

The couple had seen their fair share of drought and dust and Brett said that's why they came to the southern Riverina – for reliability of water.

"When we purchased our farm at Barooga in 2001, we had 1000ML of permanent water thrown in, it was hardly even valued back then."



Today the topic of water is never far away. As Brett said "it all comes down to water".

Brett admits he finds it hard to stomach the quarterly MIL bills in years of zero allocation.

"I still can't believe we are paying for something we don't receive, imagine taking out a grain contract, not delivering any grain and expecting full payment."

In years of zero allocation the business buys water as needed.

"If we need to borrow to buy water to make a return on investment we can only afford to pay \$200-\$250/ML tops to water crops."

In 2017 Josh and Ash came home to the family farm, a decision which motivated the business to expand and buy land at Jerilderie for summer cropping.

The purchase was meant to give them geographic diversity and spread farm income throughout the year with a summer rice crop. Aside from some carryover water in the first year, they have had zero water allocation and no rice crop, but 2020 is shaping as the best season at Jerilderie yet, thanks to good rainfall.

With or without an allocation; the business remains prepared for the future.

They work with farm business consultants, Farmanco to use

benchmarking for production and finance management as well as cash flow budgets.

Considering the history of this family, it is not surprising they are willing and able to run a dryland cropping operation and do so well.

But as Brett pointed out; they could always grow more crop and provide food for so many more people if they just had water.

The family has an obvious strength in their united front. Whether they are undertaking business planning, researching new cropping technologies or doing hours in the tractor, they are all in this together.

Josh aims to be cropping 2000 ha in the near future; and with Ash taking on the role of bookkeeper they will be busy. "I think we're doing well, but I'm sure we can do better," Josh said.

"This is a great area to farm – you're always guaranteed a crop of something, whether it's grain or hay, we just have to adapt."

Brett and Jo both have off-farm passions including lawn bowls and horses and are happy to see Josh and Ash take over the farms.

It is evident the family loves the region and the lifestyle it offers, the people they have met and the climate and as relatively new locals they are here for the long run.



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I still can't believe we are paying for something we don't receive, imagine taking out a grain contract, not delivering any grain and expecting full payment



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I don't know what is going to happen with water, if the wheel doesn't turn we are in trouble

The farm's not broken but water policy is

At 84 June Brooks has been through the dairy industry's highs and lows but she told SOPHIE BALDWIN she could not believe the mess governments have made of water policy across the country

JUNE Brooks has always lived by the motto 'if it's not broken don't fix it' which possibly could explain why the 84-year-old is still heavily involved in the family dairy farm.

June and her late husband Frank began their foray into dairying 60 years ago; on a 320-acre parcel of land at Barooga—in an era when milk was picked up unrefrigerated, in cream cans, from the dairy.

"I remember coming home from our honeymoon to milk 50 cows in a walk-through dairy, milking three or four cows at a time, and that has been my life ever since," she laughed.

"Frank and I would get up at 5am, have a cup of coffee and he would get the cows up and I would set the dairy up and that was what we did seven days a week—when he passed away I just continued with the same routine," she said.

And every morning June is still the first person to arrive at the dairy.

By 5.30 am she has the lights on, the filters in and the computer on, always making sure everything is ready to go.

"I could come home if I wanted to, but nine times out of 10 I stay around and help. There is always a sick cow or some other job that needs a hand," she said.

Grandson Riley Brooks, the third generation of the family to take on the farm, laughs as he says June beats him to the cowshed every morning.

"June is just amazing. She still pays all the bills, does odd jobs and cruises around the farm in her John Deere buggy," Riley said.

On the morning I spoke to June, she had been spraying thistles on a channel bank before coming inside to make some date scones for her nephew.

June has seen a lot in her six decades of dairying, including the expansion of the family farm to now include two dairy farms and numerous cropping blocks.

"Frank said when he married me he had two and sixpence, I have a bit more than that now," she laughed.

June said she has weathered the storm of many droughts in her lifetime but last years was one of the driest she had ever experienced.

"It has been tough but I think the drought has been good for the boys (her sons Jason and Shane) because they have learnt a lot when it has come to management and the importance of conserving fodder.

"Frank always said to make hay while the sun shines and we have always tried to have at least a year's worth of feed ahead of us."

She said water allocation was always a major concern and she shakes her head at the way government has messed up the system.

"I don't know what is going to happen with water, if the wheel doesn't turn we are in trouble," she said.

June is also particularly pleased her grandson Riley is looking to a future on the farm.

"He is a great little worker and is wonderful with the calves."

Riley started working on the farm when he finished school in 2011.

"I started milking cows and never left. I am pretty patient with animals and I really enjoy working with them," Riley said.

Amongst his many roles, Riley enjoys rearing the 200 odd calves that are born annually in the herd of Friesian, Jersey and crossbreds.

"These type of cows suit our grazing system. We grow a lot of grass and a smaller cow really performs well for us."

Riley said one of his focuses since he started working on the farm has been to improve the genetic potential of the herd and over the past seven years, he has been using the services of Nu-Genes Nurmurkah to achieve that.

"We are really starting to see an improvement in the quality of the cows in the herd which is great. We use sexed semen on the heifers which also allows us to export up to 50 excess heifers a year."

Interestingly the business has chosen



to run two separate milking herds across two different farms.

The home farm where Riley works with his dad Shane, milks 450 split calving cows at its peak, through a 50 unit rotary, while just down the road his uncle Jason milks 250 autumn calving cows through a 22 double up.

"Running two dairies helps us with management, reduces risk and helps share the work load. My uncle's farm has a two month break while the home dairy runs all year round."

The family grows all their own fodder requirements only buying in grain.

Silage features heavily in the mix.

"We cut and wrap our own silage and we have found round bales work better for us than a pit system," he said.

They grow all the usual fodder including oats, vetch, rye-grass and clover and this year they have been able to carry over water so there will be water in the system to irrigate come springtime.

"We have invested heavily in a 150 MI recycle dam for our pipe-and-riser system and we are trying to be as water efficient as we possibly can.

"We have some of the best infrastructure here in the Riverina but water security is a huge uncertainty for us moving forward, although I do think there is a great future for the dairy industry itself."

The Brooks families have been farming in and around the Barooga area for many, many decades.

"Farming has been a bit of a legacy in the Brooks family and between us all we feed a lot of people, I hope we get the opportunity to continue that well into the future," he said.

An insatiable taste
**for her gourmet
mushrooms**





AMY Lolicato and her partner Andrew Arthur have found a seamless transition to diversifying their mixed irrigation farming business – by growing mushrooms.

These remarkable fungi – and there are more than 50,000 varieties of them – is something of an obsession for Amy, who says she has always loved the more unusual in the pantheon of mushies.

And their incredible flavours.

“Mushroom growing fits perfectly with our existing business given we are able to use our rice straw for the growing substrate and our grain off-farm for the grain spawn component of the growing process,” the 31-year-old said.

“Gourmet mushroom growing is also done in a completely controlled environment, an idea which as a producer I also loved. There was no worrying about weather, water allocations and prices,” she said.

“I gained an interest and love of specialty mushrooms during my time at Melbourne University where I had made a lot of international friends, especially from Asian countries.

“We would dine at restaurants that served amazing Asian food and, being a vegetarian, I was always ordering the meals that came with unusual mushrooms. >>>



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"I also did a six-month university exchange to northern Italy, where there were the most delicious local mushrooms so readily available in the town market – and it wasn't just the home shoppers, they were also used throughout the local restaurants.

"Unfortunately we don't have a great deal of exposure, or access, to gourmet mushrooms here in the regional areas, let alone Australia more generally."

Well this couple were just the people needed to give the more unusual (but still humble) mushrooms something of a kick start.

From the beginning of 2018, Amy started hitting the reference books, reading up on gourmet mushroom growing and then by October she was primed and good to go with a two-day mushroom cultivation workshop through Milkwood Permaculture.

This gave a hands-on polish to her volumes of book learning, setting her up to launch her own micro production at home to test her basic skills.

If you fast forward to mid 2020 Amy is currently growing an array of oyster species; which include pinks, yellows, tans, winter whites, ulmarius, pearls and kings.

"I have always loved the flavour

and versatility of these gourmet mushrooms," Amy said.

"Now I am growing them myself, for us and for our customers," she said.

"I am still learning and want to know everything I can about them and it is still such a passion for me to watch my mushrooms grow.

"While it takes a couple of months of backgrounding work to go from the initial liquid culture to the grain stage to the substrate, oyster mushrooms go from tiny pinheads on the colonised straw to fully formed mushrooms in as little as four days.

"They are some of the easiest to grow and can be successfully done using low-tech methods – and straw (about as low-tech as you can go on a farm).

"Now, within the next six months or so, I am planning to branch out into wood loving species, which are a different proposition as they require sterile work."

The mushrooms are grown on the couple's farm at Moulamein, in south western NSW, where they also farm rice and sheep.

They are currently producing about 12kg of mushrooms from their fledgling enterprise, with their short-term goal to quickly reach 30kg per week.

"The mushrooms are being grown in two insulated shipping containers that are sitting in our backyard,"

Amy explained.

"One of the containers is for the incubation stage, which requires dark and a stable temperature of between 20C and 22C," she said.

"The other container is used for the fruiting process, where fully colonised bags then fruit mushrooms across a seven-day (or so) period.

"This container is highly controlled, with a consistent temperature of about 18C, the right amount of fresh air exchange as the carbon dioxide builds up from the growing mushrooms, a humidity level of 90 per cent and a high level of light for at least 12 hours per day.

"If the mushroom venture proves to be economically feasible and scalable, we will consider investing in permanent infrastructure for the farm."

Amy said she has been casually selling the mushrooms to friends and locals for the past couple of months, and her product is now also available through Moulamein IGA, Little Pork Deli in Barham and Boo's Place in Swan Hill.

And as the business grows, Amy said she hoped to expand into other surrounding Murray River towns.

Learn more about the new venture on the 'Moulamein Mushrooms' Facebook page.





FLOUR POWER

— it's Woodstock
all over again >>>

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I can remember it was all a bit strange being organic farmers at the time; but dad had strong beliefs and didn't like the idea of using chemical poison to grow food



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In 1969 it was the greatest show on earth but Woodstock circa 2020 is a slightly different enterprise. Instead of music on a dairy farm SOPHIE BALDWIN found a cool young couple turning to flour power to create a new market for the family farm

O **OPENING a bag of freshly milled Woodstock flour is tangible proof good things really do come in small packages.**

Established by Ian Congdon and Courtney Young, Woodstock Flour is the culmination of the couple's shared passion for farming, the environment and producing amazing quality organic food.

For Ian, that passion was instilled growing up on the family farm Woodstock, on 2000 acres just outside Berrigan.

Ian's parents were farming organically well before the practice became popular, converting in the early '90s, a time when it would have been more the exception rather than the rule.

"I can remember it was all a bit strange being organic farmers at the time; but dad had strong beliefs and didn't like the idea of using chemical poison to grow food," Ian said.

Farming organically for more than two decades, the family business now runs a self-replacing Poll Merino flock selling meat into the organic market alongside an opportunistic cropping program which is very much

dependent on seasonal conditions.

Ian and Courtney met at university studying landscape management and agricultural science. They both knew they wanted to get into farming but they weren't too sure how.

In 2016, after coming across a family who were value adding oats grown on their farm to sell at farmers' markets, Ian and Courtney decided a value adding business could be a good way to get involved in the family farm.

"We both thought that was pretty cool and that maybe we could do something similar with the grain back at home; which was begging for some value adding. Mum and dad only ever sold into the commodity market and I felt that never really capitalised on the quality of their grain," he said.

"We also saw an opportunity to provide our community with fresh flour with a known provenance," Courtney said.

They decided to test the waters by purchasing a small domestic flour mill and began trying their luck at farmers' markets.

As part of the process they started engaging with bakers to learn more about flour and baking, which in turn

started to generate interest for their flour product.

Ian and Courtney both knew they needed a bigger mill but with none to be found in Australia, they ended up importing one from the US. The whole process took about a year and in early 2018 the granite stone mill ground into life – and it has been turning ever since.

Ian said the mill was perfect for producing finely milled wholegrain flour and the whole process has been so successful they are now looking at a second one, although this time they are going to have a go at building it themselves to avoid the costly and time consuming business of importing.

The current milling process is quite labour intensive, with Ian tipping the raw product in the top and manually packing it once it comes out the bottom so as the business expands, they will look at ways to reduce manual labour.

The flour is sold in small one kilo packets through to 12.5kg packed on a pallet and sent out to bakers across NSW and into Victoria.

"We now produce spitfire wheat (bread), rosella wheat (cake), triticale,



rye and spelt flours. All our flours are 100 per cent wholegrain, which means they retain the nutritious and flavoursome bran and germ of the wheat kernel. Our flours are milled fresh to order and suit all kinds of baking,” Courtney said.

This year we are on track to produce 50 tonne of flour.

Interestingly sales have boomed over COVID-19 and demand from the home baker has increased to around 300 kgs a fortnight.

Demand from our bakers has decreased as they obviously aren’t getting the same numbers of people through their doors but overall we are still milling around 1500 kg of flour a fortnight.

The couple has built up a successful social media following; which has been a key part of their business model. They also host a sourdough and wholegrain baking workshop to teach others how to use their flour and share their processes on the farm and in the mill.

Recently they started a community supported mill – a membership or subscription-based model which allows consumers to receive regular monthly deliveries of flour.

“This helps us to share the abundance and risk that comes with producing food, running a flour mill and regeneratively managing the landscape. The commitment by the



customer ensures our entire harvest and crop rotation is accounted for,” Courtney said.

The membership also helps provide financial security as they continue to refine their systems in the mill and on the farm.

The couple are starting small in their immediate community but who knows

where the community mill could lead down the track.

“Woodstock Flour has been founded on a love of food, farming and family. We are passionate about producing fresh healthy and flavoursome food, regenerating our patch of country, and connecting with our community,” Courtney said.

Where only **THE SKY IS THE LIMIT**



It was never planned to be this big but when two brothers found themselves at the helm of a 30,000 acre holding; they set about turning it into a seriously integrated agribusiness that is set to make hay as the sun shines on what should be a bumper season. SOPHIE BALDWIN reports

WHEN Jeremy Barlow finally finishes farming, he hopes to leave the land in better shape than when he first bought it.

And that's a pretty big ask when you're sitting on 30,000 acres—give a yard or two.

"I love the bush and the changing seasons—they can be so harsh and then it turns around and you get one like this year, which amazes you just how well things can grow," Jeremy said.

And after the past two ordinary years, Jeremy—along with every other southern Riverina farmer—is certainly looking forward to a good season.

"We are just so blessed to live and farm where we do at Jerilderie," he added.

"We really are in a magnificent part of the world; where there is so much potential, limited really only by the scale of your thinking."

For Jeremy and brother David, his partner in the family business, the thinking has been enormous as it has grown to include a 50,000-tonne grain storage facility, six semis and those 30,000 acres of dryland cropping.

The Barlow operation is very much a family business; with Jeremy and wife Jenny, David and wife Jeanette and 25 employees at its peak. The kids have

always pitched in and helped out as soon as they were old enough to be helpful—and as part of their succession planning, they have always been paid fairly for their work.

Whether it's growing crops for Barlow Agricultural or running Jerilderie Grain Storage and Handling, the boys have certainly come a long way from their humble beginnings; managing 2600 acres for a group of Melbourne investors in the early 1990s.

"Back then there was lots of summer cropping and we ran a pretty intensive irrigated program underpinned by the fact we could always buy as much

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I really feel for the irrigators. Dairy and rice are on their knees and the impacts from poor water policy are a huge concern moving forward, government needs to get this right. Farming is such an important part of our community and our economy and it certainly needs to be valued more than it is



temporary water as we wanted,” Jeremy said.

In 1998 the boys jumped at the opportunity to lease the block themselves with the added option of purchasing five years later.

“Back in those days we did a lot of contracting and also grew rice, which really got us up on the front foot,” he said.

But things weren't all beer and skittles in the farming sector and Jeremy started to notice cracks beginning to appear, with temporary water prices increasing from \$20Ml to more than \$100Ml.

“The last year we grew a rice crop was 2000; and in that same year we also

decided to build some grain storage,” Jeremy said.

Laughingly describing themselves as young and stupid at the time, the brothers came up with an idea to make their own harvest easier by building a bit of storage.

But things soon got out of hand as they realised they had to pay for Road and Traffic Authority turning lanes on the highway, build a weighbridge, offices and of course 12,000 tonnes of built up silo storage.

“All of a sudden it went from an idea to a business that we really had to make financial,” he added.

At the same time they were establishing the storage business the opportunity came up to purchase the leased block and later additional farming land at Boree Creek.

“We had a bit of energy back then and we leased and bought land right up until we sold Boree Creek in 2012.”

Jeremy thought he was scaling down the farming side but the opportunity to purchase three good dry blocks closer to home meant he was back farming more land than he had ever dreamt of.

In 2008 the brothers made the difficult decision to sell all their general security allocation and become dryland farmers. >>>



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It was a massive decision at the time. "I guess you could say we have learnt to live without irrigation.

"We now only buy water on the temporary market at a price we think we can afford. We are opportunistic irrigators and we would only ever buy water to start or finish off a crop," Jeremy said.

All the summer crop country has been converted to a winter cropping program which actually starts in summer as they prepare their land for autumn sowing.

Jeremy said the past 35 years from a farming perspective have been a huge learning curve and the arrival of GPS technology has been a huge advance.

"Technology has improved at such a rapid rate and we now look after our paddocks and soils so much better than we ever used to."

He said the crops this year are extraordinary and illustrate the real potential of the region.

"If you look after your country and do things right; it will look after itself and this year is as good as I have ever seen it," he said.

And while the family already have a power of land to look after, Jeremy wouldn't rule out adding more if the right block of land came up.

"Oaklands through to Moulamein is



such a prosperous dryland cropping area but I really feel for the irrigators. Dairy and rice are on their knees and the impacts from poor water policy are a huge concern moving forward, government needs to get this right."

The brothers have also learnt to be adaptable and work with every season.

"The past couple of years have been tough but we did manage to grow a bit of hay, I can remember one day I loaded 32 trucks and they just went everywhere," he laughed.

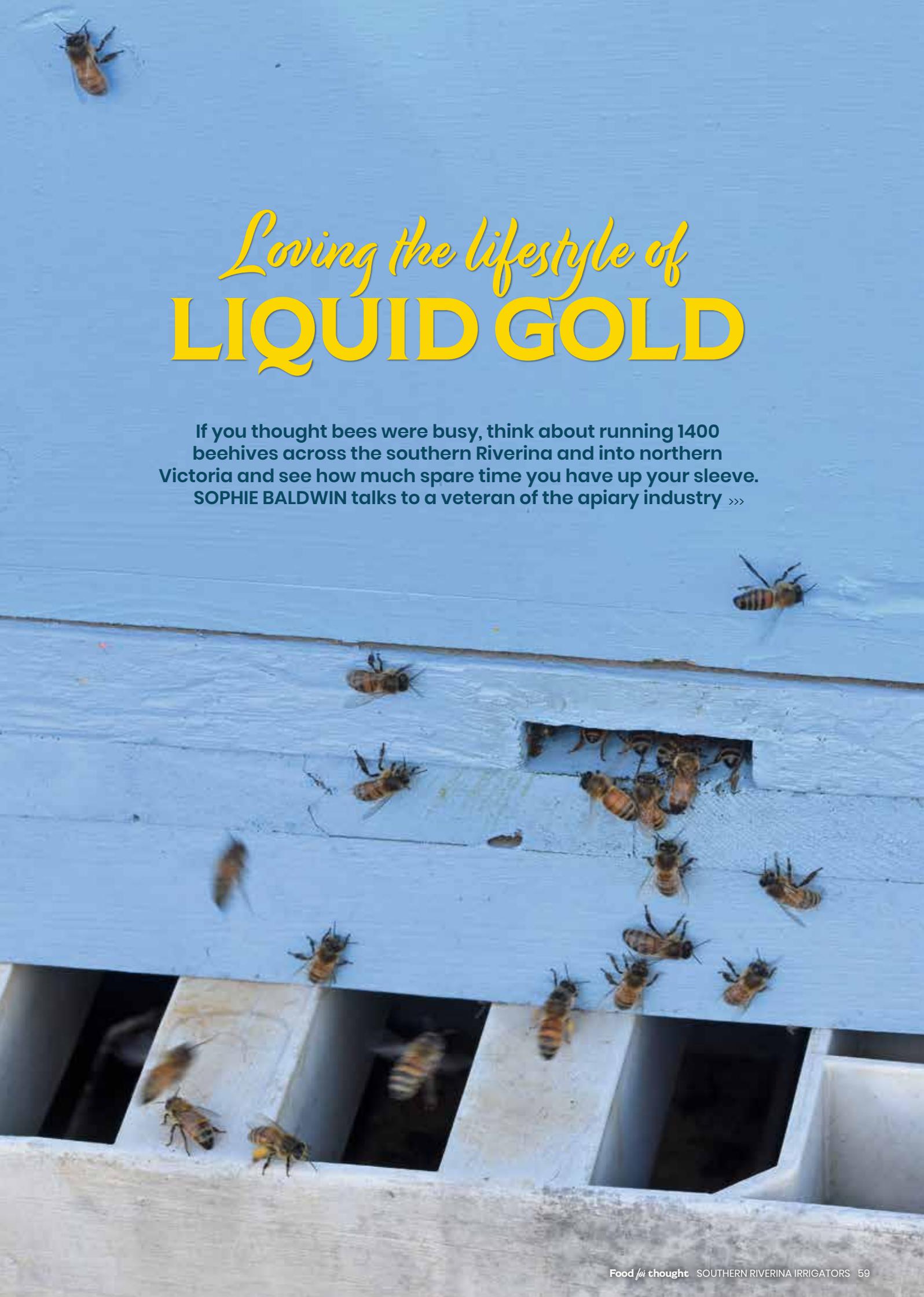
Jeremy attributes the business success to the working relationship he has with his brother – it might not

always be perfect but it seems to work as they play to their own personal strengths.

David is the man behind the grain marketing and running the truck side of things while Jeremy's passion is always farming, although David does run the headers at harvest time.

The past couple of years might have been tough on business and the community, but this season things couldn't look better.

"Farming is such an important part of our community and our economy and it certainly needs to be valued more than it is," Jeremy said.



Loving the lifestyle of **LIQUID GOLD**

If you thought bees were busy, think about running 1400 beehives across the southern Riverina and into northern Victoria and see how much spare time you have up your sleeve. SOPHIE BALDWIN talks to a veteran of the apiary industry >>>

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FOR more than 3000 years honey has been known as the nectar of the gods; throughout the bible it is often cited as a holy substance.

No wonder Don Cochrane thought he must have been onto something when he decided to become a beekeeper.

And for the past 40 years he has been chasing hives around the southern Riverina and interstate.

Initially he just wanted a job where he could work for himself, be his own boss, but he soon found there were also plenty of perks to being a beekeeper—including lots of lovely countryside, fields of crops and plenty of peace and quiet.

"I started out with just five hives and built myself up from there, to a peak of 1400," Don said.

"Around three years ago I started to downsize and I am now down to around 140," he said.

Don and his wife Ofelia have worked side by side harvesting honey for many years but as they are approaching retirement, they are looking to scale

back their operation, although they do still enjoy working with bees.

The harvest season kicks off in September and finishes around February and Don said it takes about a week to get a honey flow established and then away the bees go.

"Every year you lose about 10 per cent of the hive. I would bring mine back home to Finley and put them out near the canola and soon numbers would build up and a few weeks later I could split them into new hives."

He said just like every other form of farming, bees too are affected by tough conditions.

"In the millennium drought gum trees that were dying flowered early as a last resort for new life and the following year there were no flowers

and no harvest."

When Don was operating at his peak he looked into running production 12 months of the year—but that meant he would have had to move hives into the Mallee and he never ended up travelling quite that far.

He always preferred to house his hives on private property.

"Over the years I had quite a few hives vandalised when they were left in reserves, so I always preferred to have them in places with no public access and farmers really like having bees on their farms. Canola doesn't need bees

for pollination but the crop certainly does better when they are around."

Around 10 years ago Don began making his own hives and he also started breeding his own population.

He has come across some pretty cranky bees over the years, but overall he



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It has gone full circle and people are now really starting to show their support for locally produced food and are happy to go direct to the supplier and that has been great for us



hasn't had too much trouble.

Don said he had lost count of the number of times he has been called to a house to remove a swarm but thankfully these days, people are aware of the importance of the busy little workers and their essential place in the environment.

"Bees have certainly increased in popularity and there are a few people having a go from home now."

Don is currently helping one of his young neighbours get a hive up and running.

He has also noticed a change in attitude with people really starting to value their locally grown food.

"It has gone full circle and people are now really starting to show their support for locally produced food and are happy to go direct to the supplier and that has been great for us."

Back in the old days Don used to pour his honey straight into 200 litre containers and truck it off to Capilano, and while he still does do that today, his specialty Logie Brae Honey can be found popping up in quite a few little shops around the district.

"While we are still fit and healthy we will stick with it for a while longer yet," Don laughed.



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