

MEET THE MAKER

Young family embraces apple tree change

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine speaks to Liz Hutcheson from Denmark Heritage Apples about her tree change with husband Caleb and daughter Lila.

Southerly Magazine: When did you move down?

Liz Hutcheson: We moved down at the beginning of this year. So it's all new for me, but it's not for Caleb.

SM: What prompted the move?

LH: We both wanted to move back to Caleb's roots. We've been looking for a farm down south for a while. And then the opportunity came up at Christmas. We were talking about our plans and what we'd found so far. Caleb's mum Julie and her husband Bill said, "Let's start looking at you guys taking over and what's that going to look like".

SM: When did they take over the property?

LH: Julie and Bill took over from the Bridgarts about 15 years ago. They've gone up north for the first holiday they've been able to take during apple season for a few years. It's definitely been a journey for us so far. There's a lot to learn and take in. But it's good because they're still here. So we're sort of slowly taking over and learning things. Caleb grew up, when he was really young, in Arnhem Land where his mum was a regional nurse. He went to agricultural boarding school in Bindoon for a while. He then did his apprenticeship in heavy diesel mechanics in agriculture, specifically in agriculture. He did most of his apprenticeship down here and at Albany TAFE. He just started working for farmers and loved it.

SM: You'd imagine they're pretty handy skills to have on the farm as well?

LH: That's probably another reason why it made sense for us to take it over, because we were already looking for this lifestyle and Caleb had that background. So it was a natural progression.

SM: And what's your background? You're now studying law and accounting?

LH: I am. I've worked in mainly anything to do with community, for an accounting firm, specifically in native title. I worked really closely with communities and I've also worked for a law firm in the pro bono area.

SM: Was it having your daughter that made you start to think about moving to the country?

LH: We knew we wanted to settle down in the country. And then we got married, had a baby. We thought, "We'll wait until she's in school" and then we sort of said, "No, let's not wait. Why wait? Why tough it out in the city if that's not what we want to do? Let's just take a risk and move to the country and enjoy having her while she's young". We started looking a year ago, to move down south, but we hadn't really told anyone that was our plan.

SM: Going back to the roots of the orchard itself, when was it first planted?
LH: Most of the trees were planted 25 years ago by the Bridgarts who were from New Zealand. A lot of the varieties we have are actually from New Zealand, and other things that we have



■ Lila, Liz and Caleb Hutcheson in their Denmark apple orchard.

on the property as well – feijoas and tamarillos. They're not all necessarily from New Zealand but they're quite popular over there. Bill and Julie have also planted, and they're really excited and inspired now to keep growing and doing and building now that we're here. We also have oranges, mandarins and lemons. We've started making new plans for potentially new crops depending on some soil testing.

SM: What might that look like?

LH: We'd love to start getting to raspberries. We've been doing a bit of research and talking to some people who used to do raspberries in Denmark and Albany and the Great Southern. We're pretty big on paying homage to the previous generation and learning through knowledge passed down through generations. I think that's the big thing, paying homage to people that have previously done it, and then learning through that, that handing

down of knowledge through the generations. We have one child, so no pressure! She loves it out here: she's thriving.

SM: It's a pretty magic environment to grow up in.

LH: She's a very social person. That was the only problem that we worried about. She's very engaging: she loves people. So we were a little worried about the isolation of it compared to what she was used to, being difficult to adjust. But she's also a COVID baby. She was born in February 2020 and Perth's first COVID case was announced while I was in hospital after surgery. We were home for a week. And Caleb was FIFO at the time – we were trying to set ourselves up because we're young – so he was FIFO at the time and he flew out. And that's when we went into our first lockdown and he said, "I don't know if I can come back".



SM: That must have been incredibly hard.

LH: I had a very traumatic birth. And I didn't have much aftercare because the services were all put on hold. We had one nurse who could come and see us. Lila was thankfully healthy. They were just very crazy times. We weren't allowed to have anyone come over. I sat inside a house with a newborn for a week on my own.

SM: What a contrast in your life from two years ago to now.

LH: My life is very different.

SM: Did you grow up in the city?

LH: Yes. I met Caleb when I was about 14 or 15. He was my first boyfriend and I was his first girlfriend. And then his mum moved him to the boarding school and I moved to a different high school. We ran into each other again when we were about 23 and moved in with each other within a month. The

rest is history.

SM: How many varieties of apples are you growing?

LH: We have 11. We are picking fruit in February through to late August. The yield from that number of trees – I couldn't tell you this year, because it's the first year with the net – but I would say upwards of about 25 tonnes.

SM: What prompted you to get the netting?

LH: We lost our entire crop in March 2020 to Baudin's Black Cockatoos. There was no easy way to move them on without impacting them, and they're an endangered species. It was the first time we've had that many come through that quickly. Usually we would expect to lose about five to 10 trees, which is manageable. But they were obviously really hungry. And the thing was that they didn't actually want the apples. They split the apples and eat

waste. There were apples everywhere, and you couldn't use them.

SM: Apart from the birds, what are the main pests that you're dealing with?

LH: We mainly only just have the normal insects that you would get on any anyone's garden. And kangaroos. They will shake the trees to get the fruit. But I think we're really fortunate because we have such a low number of pests and insects. A lot of it's taking care of that ecosystem. So the birds that do get in are smaller. They're not interested in the apples and the seeds: they're interested in the bugs. It's a nice ecosystem. We have a lot of spiders now. We know the spiders are in there for the smaller bugs. The bugs are taken care of by the spiders. We've got so many gorgeous little frogs and they just hide and pop out when you're picking and then move on. They're also a really good indicator of a healthy ecosystem and a healthy crop because we are pesticide free. It's evident that we definitely don't use pesticides because we have just so many gorgeous little frogs and big fat happy frogs in there as well to be honest.

SM: When is your other fruit in season?

LH: We have mandarines early May, the Imperial stock coming out towards June and the oranges usually around July – usually when the last apple starts coming out which is the Sundowner. Because we are so far south, compared to what you see up towards Donnybrook way, it is ripening much later in the season. So you see a lot of different varieties come into the shops a lot earlier than when they come in for us because we're so far south.

SM: Are there many other apple growers down this way?

LH: There's not too many, just the boutique ones.

SM: Apart from the Farmers Market, where can people buy your fruit?

LH: In Denmark at the BP. We've been selling there for years. Also the Denmark Health Food Shop. Then we also sell to smaller retailers. Bred Co use our apples on their danishes. Denmark Farmhouse Cheese have our apples on their cheese boards. Mario's Stockfeeds have also taken some of our apples.

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SM: They're not going up to Perth markets?

LH: We're trying to stick to local. I think it's a generational thing of sustainability: we're looking at sustainable practices going forward. We're called Denmark Heritage Apples because yes, we have heirloom varieties, but also heritage, in paying homage to the way apples have been produced and picked and packed for generations. But then also to start new practices in terms of sustainability. Where many farms use your diesel machinery we want to try to limit that if we can.

SM: So replacing the heavy machinery with electric?

LH: Sustainable energy. It's hard with solar power down here, obviously. It would be really great if over time we were able to look into wind energy, or anything like that. And then I guess other areas would be just transport. So ensuring that your produce footprint is small as well, transporting produce around burns fossil fuels.

SM: How do you approach soil health in the orchard? Do you use compost?

LH: I would love to be able to but the problem is we have so many trees in one spot. We use a local mineral fertiliser packed with all the great beneficial bacteria and fungi. It reduces water wastage as well. It's an absolutely fantastic brand.

SM: What's in season right now?

LH: At the moment we have Royal Galas and Golden Delicious. We have Jonagold which are those huge ones. We also have Braeburn. That's a New Zealand one; it was a chance seedling.

SM: A chance seedling? So it sprung up here or in New Zealand?

LH: In New Zealand. We have had one that has sprung up here and it was identified and then bred further, in our orchard, and that was a Gala Supreme. I think that we're the only people who have them down here, to be honest. I think really there's not many out there. They're actually not related to Galas at all. It was a chance seedling of a Red Delicious.

SM: Have they proven to be popular?

LH: They're only ripe for the first three weeks of season. So they're always in very high demand. We usually sell out of them within the first hour at the markets and we only sell them there.

SM: Are most of the varieties you grow eating apples or cooking apples?

LH: I'd say most of them are eating apples. Nearly all of them are, to be honest. If you're into a tart apple we have Granny Smiths and Golden Delicious which are great for cooking. And then some of the more regular eating ones. The chance seedlings can be confusing. Take the Granny Smith, for example. The story is that Granny Smith was buying heirloom apples for cooking and throwing the seeds out of her window. One day when she was looking out and she noticed some trees had started growing so she went out and one was this Granny Smith. It was a total chance that it had grown. It comes either from a mutation or cross pollination or just something that's happened from planting something



■ Lila picks an apple from the orchard with mum, Liz.



■ Fruit from a chance seedling at Denmark Heritage Apples orchard.

that's normally in the northern hemisphere in the south. We don't have Bravos, unfortunately, but we have the Pink Lady and also the Sundowner from WA. The Sundowners are our last ones. "Sundowner" means when the sun is most down in June and July, that's when they are they in season.

SM: Which is your favourite?

LH: I'm a sucker for a Royal Gala. No one agrees with me, but I really

love our Royal Gala. They're not as powdery, and there's something really special about a Royal Gala if you grew up in the city. You have Royal Galas in Coles and all the ones that are in Coles they're always last season's. We don't store anything in cold storage. We don't play with any oxygen. Everything we sell is freshly picked every single week – often the day before we've decided to sell them, like at a market. We don't cold store at all. A lot of the

large companies do and some of the apples that you have in the shops are a year old. So that's where you get that powdery taste from, that sweeter stigma around Royal Gala. It's really powdery and starchy. It wasn't until I came out here and tasted one of their apples and I was like, "This is what they're meant to taste like!"

SM: What's Lila's favourite?

LH: Her's are Gala Supremes, definitely. We get quite a few small ones. So we do kids' apples, or the smaller ones we pop in lunchboxes and people absolutely love them because they're just so hard to come by. Most shops have that perfect round, exact same size, symmetrical kind of apple and that's not what ours always are. That's why we always do loose apples at the markets, because some people like the authenticity of an apple with a wormhole in it – and smaller apples.

SM: Are you doing any value adding?

LH: We do dried apples but physically we have not had the time recently, since the move. We basically got the call from Bill and Julie saying, "Yes. Let's do this." And then we both quit our jobs the next day. We were down by the beginning of February and then the first pick happens on February 28. So we moved down, unpacked the house, settled in and then started the business.

SM: So you have hit the ground running?

LH: For Caleb it was like, "Yeah, it's normal. I do this every year", but for me, I've been making adjustments.

SM: You must be so busy with study, work, work in town. Have you felt like you've met people in the community as well?

LH: Definitely. We have made some fantastic connections. We also sell to the Kwoorabup Markets. One of the ladies there buys our apples and sells it through Denmark Homegrown.



■ Royal Galas freshly picked and ready for market.

SM: Through their boxes?

LH: Yes. And people in this town are so welcoming. I think one of the questions that you had was how did we overcome the difficulties of running a farm and making this successful? And honestly, it's the community. The community is so supportive and so fantastic. And they support local growers and it's just such a gorgeous town and welcoming town to live in. Not just operate in. I know there's millions of hours that have

been put in by Julie and Bill. But what makes us would be the community and their support. Things like when the apples were taken out by the birds. They were huge supporters of us and took what they could and stuff like that.

SM: If you could only eat one of your apples, which would it be?

LH: I'm tempted to say Royal Gala but maybe I would go Golden Delicious, because you can cook with them, too.

You can do everything with a Golden Delicious.

SM: Golden Delicious seems like one of those forgotten breeds. We've seen them left to go to waste because there wasn't a market for them.

LH: I was talking to one of the guys who owns a truffle place up towards Manjimup recently and he was saying he grew up with orchards around him and basically they just had fads.

Everyone wanted red apples or green apples and people would pull up all their red apples and plant green rather than keeping them. Pulling them all up to the point where everyone just had reds. And then there was one guy who kept greens and he did so well because he had the only green. I think that's very true. I think there are fads of different types. I asked Julie, "What's the trend over the past couple years?" and she said she doesn't actually know because everyone just loves her apples.

SM: Perhaps that's the difference. You're not stocking to big supermarket chains, which would experience those fads. You're selling to people who want what's in season and local.

LH: I think since COVID, a lot of people do more baking. Everyone's sort of just embraced baking. So they're questions we get a lot at the market: "What's a good crisp apple?" and "What's a good apple to bake with?" I guess over time as people become more conscious of sustainability and where things come from generally. They question what's getting put on them as well. I think that is why we have that little foot in the door, because we are spray-free as well. A lot of people love our frogs because it shows the healthy ecosystem we have here, and that we are definitely spray-free. There are no pesticides. I think there's been a huge push recently of people being more health conscious, and health conscious for their kids. They love our lunchbox apples because they can't find them in stores and, because they're spray-free, they're good. Good for kids – the healthy option of healthy options. **S**

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