

MEET THE MAKER

Fresh start pays dividends for farming family



Southerly Magazine: How long has it been since the family moved over from South Africa?

Annecke Theron: We came in 2006, so it's been around 15 years already.

SM: What prompted the move?

AT: The whole situation in South Africa. The kids didn't have a future there at all.

SM: What sort of farming life did you leave behind?

AT: Johan was doing a different kind of farming – irrigation – so it was a big learning curve for us to come here. We just did a little bit of livestock, haymaking, pecan nuts and corn, so the two crops a year. It was a family farm. Johan's parents are still in South Africa but my parents are here. We were on the family farm but we just had to make a decision. So we basically took the leap, but sometimes you have to take 10 steps back to get 10 steps ahead later on.

SM: Okay, so let's ask the last question first: Were the 10 backward steps worthwhile in the end?

AT: Oh we're 20 steps ahead I think. We're very, very thankful, especially when COVID hit. Johan always says we should have done it earlier. We should have basically come the moment we got married.

SM: What was the plan when you first arrived?

AT: We worked for other farmers. You can't jump into agriculture unless you know the area. We started off between Southern Cross and Merredin. The closest town was about 40km away. I think the hardest thing for us was still the Australian language because we thought we'd be fine. I remember the first time they told me how to get to town. They said to me that you drive on the gravel and then you hit the bitumen and then keep on going. Bitumen? I didn't even know what that was. We were there for about two years in that area but the drought had already been in that area for about four years, which meant that the farmers just couldn't continue on so we basically moved to a

farm in Williams and worked for David Kain. We got to know the industry as a whole. We moved to Esperance then we moved to Manjimup where it was so wet and you either work in the rain or you don't.

SM: So you were looking for a happy medium?

AT: Yes, we were slowly moving our way back this way and then realised that you have to be on the western side of the Albany Highway and on the southern side of Muir Highway to have a more reliable kind of rainfall. We had a look at this property, but the orchard is intensive. It's something we didn't know and we thought maybe this was not for us.

SM: What was here when you first arrived?

AT: There was pretty much just the packing shed and the orchard.

SM: What did the orchard consist of when you first arrived?

AT: The orchard is mainly apricot trees. There's a bit of peach and a bit of Kiwi fruit. So we have the capacity of about 2,000 trees but in production currently we have 1,300, of which there's five different varieties. One of the varieties has never produced any fruit, so we're basically cutting that one off and grafting other things on them to get something more reliable in there. If you put in new trees you're talking about 10 years before you can get any fruit off them. If you're talking about grafts, you can effectively have fruit within the first three or four years.

SM: Were you always intending to run sheep as well?

AT: We have two studs. We have a White Dorper stud and an Australian White stud. With the sheep industry as it is, you know you always have to be a price taker. Since we started we knew that on a smaller acreage you have to

do high intensity and you have to try and retain as much profit as you can inside without that middleman.

SM: How many acres are here?

AT: Close to 700. We were always working towards putting our own brand on our meat. It has taken time because you have to work through certain legislation, certain paperwork and then you have to slowly start to find a market. When one of the producers at the Farmers Markets went out, we were at a stage where we were ready and just putting the final tick on. It was about two years in the making up to that point. We just started there and extended it to other shops as well.

SM: Where are your products found now?

AT: So we are in AVEG in Albany, Denmark Express IGA, Slice of Africa in Albany and The Fruit Barn in Donnybrook. We're also in several Farmer Jacks stores in Perth. And we do an online shop as well where we do half or full lamb packs which get delivered to your front door. We do the Albany Farmers Market and Manning Markets fortnightly. So we're trying to just expand. Our outlet here should be open in the next couple of weeks – every Thursday and Friday as well. People will be able to come out here and enjoy a coffee as well and some scones and see the rest of the products.

SM: Was there a ready-made demand for apricots?

AT: The first season we started with the orchard we had no knowledge so we were dumped into the deep end. We picked all the fruit because we thought it was all about volume. We took it all to Canning Vale Market and almost got paid nothing for it. We said to one of the big producers that we had just taken on an apricot orchard. He said "Okay, so you started off with two

million to end up with one million?" So we went through the first season and we went back to one of the producers who has been a key to us and we still are working together with them. Len and Heather Handasyde from Forest Hill Strawberries have been very supportive. I remember the first thing they said was that it's not about producing the fruit, it's about finding the market for the fruit.

SM: At what point did you start going down the path of value-adding rather than relying only on fresh fruit sales?

AT: After the end of that first season, we realised that it's not doable picking it all. In the second season we dropped, I think, two-thirds of the crop and we were just stepping on apricots. It was heartbreaking, you know. It was a lot of work going in and they were beautiful apricots, so we knew we had to start value-adding.

SM: How did you start off in that new direction?

AT: We attended Agristart and that was

■ Johan and Annecke Theron have turned their 700-acre property into a very productive enterprise.



pasteurisation in the process. In the second year down we started working with Handasyde Strawberries in Albany and doing freeze-drying. So that was the second layer of product. We learned early on – and that is what the course said – you must work in partnerships, especially small businesses.

SM: How are the products then prepared for sale?

AT: We do the packaging and the mixing and everything up here and then, this year, we've just started adding the coated stuff where we've coated with carob and yoghurt. We have a no-added sugar option for people and a non-dairy option as well. We're still trying to keep as close to as healthy as you can, but just increasing the variety for all.

SM: What's your overall aim on the fruit side of the business in terms of volume?

AT: We have 1,300 trees in production and we're still not fully using it all, so we just want to get to the point where we know we are utilising all. So we go in and pick on size so certain sizes stay behind on the trees. This season we were able to go and pick all the bigger sizes that becomes your fresh fruit and then the smaller sizes went back to freeze-dried. So you're using everything that's on the trees as quick as you can. Out of the sorting crate you would have one-third that would be first grade, another third that would be second grade and then the last third would usually go into the bin. Those ones are the ones that we are drying in the commercial kitchen or making jam.

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a key. We went up for a week-long course at Muresk. They made you think and channel it down to what we needed to do and what were the steps.

Johan Theron: It was not about the farming anymore, it was about the business.

SM: What strategies came out of that experience?

AT: You needed a pilot idea. Our first thought was to blast chill. So we got the blast chiller, froze the fruit and drove around to cafes and shops and dropped them off some samples. Our thought was that the dried stuff was always a secondary to the frozen stuff. The cafes love the product but they said you can't compete against the cheap imports because they just use it inside food so it doesn't really matter. So we basically fell back on the dried

stuff. Our aim was always to try and keep it as natural as possible. My sister is coeliac and so you have to try and effectively make it consumer-friendly for all, not only for certain people.

SM: What is the process for preparing the fruit for drying?

AT: Pick it and dice it. We do a



SM: So the aim is also to minimise waste?

AT: That's right. We work with Len and take all his second grades that would not have been sold. We're also working with a producer in Donnybrook and we use his apples because, the same thing, otherwise they would be dumped in bins.

SM: Does your strategy continue to be about finding the demand and then trying to cater for it, rather than the other way around?

AT: You have to grow the customer base first before you keep on increasing the production of what you're doing. So we found it doesn't help to go in and process all of this dried stuff if you don't have a market.

SM: So each product has been the outcome of a step-by-step process?

AT: Exactly.

SM: How difficult has it been to sell the concept of dried fruit to an Australian market which has a very set idea of what that is like?

AT: The moment you say "dried fruit" people will go "oh?" So we say "taste it". The taste, for us, sells it. At the markets on Saturday a lady said she was not into apricots but she started tasting some of the carob-coated stuff and they ended up buying because she loved it. People need to realise what the product is and what the taste is.

SM: And as if you don't have enough to do, there are the Aussie Whites and Dorpers to look after. How do the dual studs work out?

AT: We started with the White Dopers right back, so we had them already. We travelled over east to find some new genetic material and we stumbled across the Australian Whites. I suppose the Australian Whites to us was more the kind of Dorper that we were trying to breed. But it was a new breed developed – only about seven years at that stage. It's a composite breed and it has White Dorper, Van Rooy, Texel and Poll Dorset in there. The White Dorper, coming from South Africa, has the feed conversion ability. They say Dorpers get fat on rocks because there can be nothing in the paddock but they still gain. They are really good mothers as well. They mix in the Van Rooy to get the shedding ability because the Dorpers would still carry a saddle on the back which means that they kind of look messy most of the time. Some studs would still have to shear, so our breeding directive was to try and get rid of the wool and we wanted them high on the leg and long in the body because that's where there is the meat carry. The Poll Dorset gives it the frame and the Texel has the gene which gives it that marbling quality inside the meat.

JT: It's like the wagyu of the lamb world.

AT: We've run them alongside each other to really compare what they're doing.

SM: And how do they compare?

JT: The Australian White lambs grow quicker than the Dorpers.

AT: The mums are actually even better. We have more twins off them, so better lambing percentages. But we still have



■ A variety of apricot products are quickly finding favour with local buyers.

the White Dorpers because they are our roots. And the Australian White rams are usually sold before they are even grown out.

JT: We were the first people to start bringing them into WA.

SM: Does the breed continue to evolve new qualities?

AT: We're doing a genetic upgrade as well, so we have a Poll Dorset ewe base. After four crosses we'll have a pure Australian White ewe and after five crosses we'll have a pure Australian White ram. We're doing that because originally it was three studs that started, so we're trying to add a bit of new genetic diversity.

SM: How many do you run?

AT: The main base on the stud side of it is about 100 of each.

SM: How many rams are you producing for sale?

JT: Between 20 and 30.

SM: And building on those numbers? What's the aim?

AT: The aim is to build on the commercial line, the meat side that we do. We are doing a higher cross of the Australian White into our meat so we're constantly crossing our commercial base to be Australian White / White Dorper because you get a very nice tasting that you can't mimic through the other breeds.

SM: What is that taste?

AT: It's melt-in-the mouth. It's not overpowering. It's a very mild taste. It doesn't taste like "sheep". The mince we have is very high in demand because it doesn't have the hard compacted fat that you would find normally when you're cooking a roast or something like that. So when you're cutting your roast you still have the juiciness from the marbling. It's a different type of fat. The White Dorper meat does take on the environmental factors. In South Africa they would graze on saltbush and that would taste different. So our thing is we have

grass-fed. We're not certified organic or anything, but we try to farm more regeneratively so we haven't sprayed in our paddocks for about three or four years. All the hay we use is grown on-farm as well. We can keep the taste the same because what you feed them in winter is the same as what you feed them in summer, so you have a consistent taste of grass-fed lamb.

SM: How many animals are you processing?

AT: We do about 20 to 30 a month. We do it on a fortnightly basis. We take them to Dardanup to the butchering company there. We then bring them down to work with Beyond the Gate Butcher in Albany and he does all the cutting, cryovacing and packing. We do our traditional boerwors sausage which has our line of spices, so we take that down to him as well and he just does all the mixing in. It's another bit of value-adding in our way. We do some apricot-marinated chops as well.

SM: Your boys look like they're from good rugby-playing stock. Do they enjoy the food you produce?

AT: I can tell you our boys could almost eat half a lamb easy. You don't stop them. It's like, these farmer boys, you just don't fill them up. They're hollow from top to bottom.

SM: You enjoy cooking?

AT: It's all coeliac, gluten-friendly because we make our own mix so there's no preservatives involved.

SM: It's a good life here?

AT: Yes, I don't think you can get better. We have the opportunity to work with the kids. All of them do market sales over the weekends as well, so we pretty much have the opportunity to work and grow with the kids. They have so much more learning opportunities.

JT: It's hard work, but everything you do must come from the heart, otherwise you'd give it up. It comes back to the fact you must enjoy what you do, take it day by day, step by step.

SM: If you could isolate one small thing about the way you're farming now that brings you the most joy, what would it be?

JT: When you see the look on the public and the consumers' faces and the enjoyment they get from the food we've produced. It's hard but we enjoy it. Every day and every new thing is a challenge. We started from scratch. We only came with suitcases. We didn't have any back-up here.

AT: It makes you think that's why we do what we're doing. It was a bit hard coming from a different country and speaking a different language. Having different roots, you don't always fit in that easily. But we decided to actually use our roots and what we have – our different style of food. Food and hospitality is our thing.

SM: Do you think food is a good way to break down barriers?

JT: We're on a tourist drive here and many people come. We talk to people from different areas around and over east. We discuss things so they learn a lot from us and we learn a lot from them. We take in the broad spectrum of Australia.

AT: We've found it interesting that the consumers who come to the farm are really interested in farming. They really want to learn, so we take them through the orchard and share what we know. And, as you say, it breaks down the barriers and people begin to feel like friends and you're sad to see them go.

SM: You go to Perth a lot to do the marketing work for your brand. Is that something you enjoy?

AT: I'm very passionate about the products, for sure.

SM: And everyone has a role?

JT: It's a team. George is 13 and he's in charge when people arrive with kids. He takes them off to see the poultry and all the little chickens. You should see the joy on the faces when all the people come here and see what we're doing.

■ Thirteen-year-old George Theron enjoys working with the Australian White and White Dorper sheep on the family's Mt Barker farm.



SM: If you had the choice of only one meal featuring your own produce, what would it be and how would it be prepared?

JT: A nice juicy lamb chop on the barbie.

AT: I would have the same. But with that chop – I make a bread and it gets

baked on that open fire as well. And then you top it with butter and apricot jam. There's nothing better.

SM: What would you have, George?

GT: Shanks. Slow-cooked for three or four hours. That's good.

AT: We have what you'd call in Australia an outdoor oven – a black, cast-iron

pot with three legs. We put that either in the fire or on gas and you put in your shanks, your veggies and everything. You build it up in layers. And the taste!

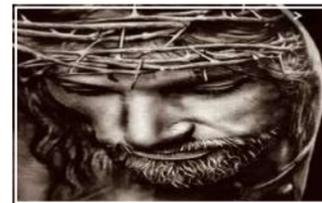
SM: School groups also make their way out here to the farm?

AT: The school brings out Year 9 students to show them a different

side of agriculture. So it's not just the consumer who comes in, but the local community so that they can all enjoy an experience. It's not just about us standing alone. Whatever we do, we want other people to experience that joy as well. And that stretches out to the students and helping where we can. **S**



HAVE YOU CONSIDERED JESUS



Jesus Christ as God's only beloved son came to this earth to redeem man back to God. His birth was miraculous and even from a young age he made a worldwide impact that resonated through the ages and into society today.

Jesus was a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another neighbouring village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. Jesus never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.

He had no credentials but Himself. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was also turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth - His coat.

The Bible tells us that one Friday almost 2,000 years ago; Jesus Christ died on a cross and was buried before sunset. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. But it also records that He left the empty tomb on Sunday morning, three days later, arising from the dead. That, according to Christians ever since, is the event of Easter. Christians for almost 20 centuries have been declaring that the Easter event is the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. This faith has changed lives in the past and it still does today.

Millions of believers throughout history and around the world, have chosen to die as martyrs rather than to deny their faith. But can educated, refined people living in our generation truly be convinced that Jesus Christ really did come back from the dead? Many would say no. They feel we have progressed too far to consider the resurrection of Jesus to be an authentic historical event. However, truth is not negotiable and historical statements of fact are not open to question. In a historical sense, the resurrection stands on ground that is solid. Reliable witnesses wrote about meeting and talking with Jesus after His death. Sceptical enemies

noticed His disappearance from the tomb. Extra biblical, historical reports were also given of His resurrection. In fact, many eyewitnesses of Jesus' post-death appearances died defending their belief in it.

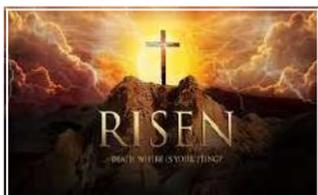
We believe that the resurrection of Jesus is a real historical occurrence with great significance for all of us today. Thus, believing or not believing in it is a life-or-death matter as it determines our eternal destiny. Nineteen long centuries have come and gone and today He is a centrepiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress. We are far within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the armed forces that have ever been assembled; all the parliaments that have ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, all put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life!

In recent years, manuscript copies of New Testament portions have been found that prove it was written when the contemporaries of Jesus Christ were still alive. The Christian church was not born nor does it exist today on the basis of Jesus' life and teachings. The church that began less than 2 months after Jesus' death is the result of something more significant than His great sayings, parables, and philosophies.

It began because a group of people in Jerusalem testified that they saw Jesus alive after He had been killed. Without the faith of those resurrection witnesses and the new faith of those who believed their testimony about it, there would be no Christian church anywhere today. The evidence is in. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a verifiable, historical event. Also the gospel still changes lives and gives courage. Thousands of believers can attest to the fact. Think of the key world events of your lifetime. Whatever comes to mind, you can be sure of this: no event has affected every human on earth and none of them has had the kind of monumental, worldwide, eternal effect that the one event almost 2,000 years ago claims to have.

This event is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is alive and well - accept Him today as your personal saviour and allow Him to change your life.

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