

MEET THE MAKER

Diversity in Piacun range

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine spoke to Elleker family Steve, Ann and Steven Piacun about their farming enterprise's expansion from sheep into olive oil, honey, eggs and beyond.

Southerly Magazine: How did you come to find yourself in Elleker after starting out in Boxwood?

Ann Piacun: Steve and I come from farming backgrounds and got together 25 years ago. I was from a dairy farm in Redmond and Steve was at Boxwood.

Steve Piacun: Sheep and wool was very good and then I managed to buy this property in 1991. Half the property out there was natural bush, and I'm a conservationist so I didn't have that option of knocking the bush down and making it into pasture. We diversified because wool and sheep then went through a huge downturn. We went into honey and olive oil.

Ann: We planted the olive trees here and at Boxwood when Steven was only a baby. But because it was so dry out there, the trees did better here. We were out there for a few years but then Steven had to come in for school, so we set up here. From there we started free-range chooks and have been going at that for a while now. We joined the Farmers Markets six months after they started. Steven grew up and then had to make the choice of whether he was going to join us or not. He finished school at Denmark Ag, worked and then after a trip to Europe he decided to join us in our journey. We handed over the chooks and we keep going with the olive oil and honey.

SM: It seems like a lot of diversification all at once.

Ann: I know. People reckoned we were crazy.

Steve: Probably even more so now because with that property out there we put into trees for high-quality furniture timber and sandalwood with the Forest Products Commission from 2000. It's like a share-farming agreement. They do the work and they pay us an annuity.

Ann: When we sat down with the Forest Products Commission we asked if they

could look into trees that might be useful for honey as well. They did that and said yes we could. So we have four different varieties of trees growing there.

SM: So there are some elements of permaculture to the enterprises?

Steve: That's right. The sheds for the chooks in the olive grove are moveable, so they get moved every couple of days and they help fertilise the trees. They all work in together.

Ann: We're all interested in permaculture and use very organic practices.

SM: How many varieties of honey do you produce.

Ann: At the moment only karri, but all different types of mallees, yate, peppermint, taylorina, sugar gum and sometimes white gum.

SM: I understand it's been a very tough season for honey producers.

Ann: Very tough. We just haven't had the rain.

SM: People still have a genuine fascination for the honey-making process?

Ann: We have school groups come out, and we do a presentation for them. They have a look at everything we do here. They love coming out to buy produce from the farm and are always asking what else we have. It's a really good thing. The Farmers Markets are a good outlet for us. We honestly can't supply enough stuff for here and Perth.

SM: How much finds its way to Perth?

Ann: We want to look after the people who are local because we believe in low food miles. We don't sell to retailers in Perth but sell direct to customers.

Steve: Ninety per cent of our stuff sells through Albany. Either they pick up here or at the Markets or from a



■ Ann, Steven and Steve Piacun are kept busy at their Elleker and Boxwood Hill properties.

drop-off point. I've sold some eggs to a shop in Margaret River but not Perth.

Ann: We're trying to do it all ourselves to avoid the middle man. Maybe in the future if we end up with lots and lots it might change, but not at the moment.

SM: Is the olive oil yield less volatile than honey from year to year?

Steve: Yes and no. You'll have a heavy year with the olives and then a light one. With the honey – with all things going well – it's normally very consistent until you get a weird year like this.

SM: Did you have any honey in reserve for this sort of event?

Steve: It's a product that stores, and we did have some surplus, but that all went.

Ann: What I really love is that local people enjoy having a locally-produced product. But all the while you're having to educate people as to why we don't have a lot of honey at the moment. They might have seen trees flowering but that doesn't mean they produce honey.

SM: Local producers seem very consistent about how much they appreciate the personal contact with their customers.

Ann: People come to us with recipes, with the names of places in Perth that want our products. It's a nice thing to do.

Steven: We're blessed with the type of people who come through the markets because the majority understand what is happening for us and they're doing their weekly shopping.

SM: At the moment you're testing the water with duck eggs. How are they coming along?

Steven: There's a niche market for the duck eggs – what I'd call "proper Poms", a few old-school Australians who use them for sponge cakes and also our Asian customers.

Steve: A few months ago I was wondering if I wasn't doing this all for nothing, but I'm in the habit now of recording how many eggs I'm getting and working out the economics of it.

SM: How many ducks do you have?

Steve: About 70 or 80.

SM: How many chooks?

Steven: I've got about 1,000 at the moment. They've got open access to the pasture. The sheds are always open so they're never locked in there. They're only in there to lay their eggs

Pictures: Wayne Harrington



and sleep. I feed them a layer pellet because they need their protein.
Steve: Steven's got a silo that holds about 12 or 13 tonnes. He buys a truckload of pellets at a time and that helps bring the costs down.

SM: Do you supplement them with anything else?
Ann: Maybe a little bit of shellgrit every now and then. But for the most part, they are pretty self-sufficient. They're really good for insect control.

SM: How frequently do you turn over the numbers?
Ann: When they get a couple of years old I sell them on and buy in some new pullets. Usually 400 at a time.

SM: Did you have to build up the poultry side very quickly to make it viable for yourself?
Steven: We help each other in everything we do but we had to grow it. My long-term plan is to get up to 2,000 chooks and use all the paddocks, not just the olive grove. I'm going into my third year of doing the chooks.

SM: How are all the products marketed?
Steven: Mum and I do the marketing. I do all the social media. And that's been

interesting because we all have an input into that.
Ann: We work together and we scrap together.
SM: So you're a completely typical farming family then?
Steven: Yep.
SM: There's a huge amount of "moving parts" here. Is it a daunting process or do you enjoy having the variety of things to do?
Steven: It's a little bit of both. Splitting the business up has helped in that way.
Ann: We all know what we have to do, basically.
Steven: We had the accountant here one night and his thoughts were that Steven needed his own identity and he should take over the chooks side of the

business. So that's what we did.

SM: So the next time Steven sees something he wants, he just needs to invite the accountant around?
Steve: We won't get him back too often or Ann and I might be chucked out.
Ann: It's hard for Steven sometimes because a lot of his mates are town people and they've got no idea that this is a seven-day-a-week job. We try to make sure he gets a weekend off every now and then because chooks are a lot like dairying.
Steven: It makes a big difference knowing that we can cover for each other.

SM: Speaking of woofers, you've got some maremma sheepdogs out with the chooks. Do they do a good job to keep them all safe?
Steven: Before we had them the foxes would come in and kill 100 chooks in a night. You can't compete with that. We built a big fence around the olive grove but it didn't keep them out. We got the maremmas and they've been fantastic.
Ann: And then we had a big problem with the ibis stealing all the chook feed, so Steve's just finished making some covers that allow the chooks to get in but the ibis are kept out. There's always something you've got to deal with.

SM: Have you ever employed outside labour?
Ann: When Steven was at Ag College we had WWOOFers (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) workers, but the Government's changes with visas mean we don't see them any more. It's just us at the moment but things might change when the honey starts flowing again.

SM: Are you done with diversification yet or are there more things to try?
Steve: You start thinking you could grow a bit of stuff. Last year we grew some tomatoes but you have to weigh it up in your mind. You can't spread yourself too thin. Steven's growing some garlic, but it all takes time to develop.
Steven: It's hard to stop. The first step is to get the honey, olive oil and eggs up to full speed and then we'll see what happens from there. But we love what we do. To wake up to the view from here and be able to hear the waves crashing as well is pretty special. **S**

