

MEET THE MAKER

Porongurup dairy keeps it pure and simple

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine spoke to Porongurup Pure's Scott and Nicole Clements about their hand-crafted dairy range from Jersey cows and East Friesian sheep.

Southerly Magazine: How did your thoughts about a farming enterprise begin?

Nicole Clements: We bought the block in 2004 when we were living in Albany. We looked at growing lavender, turkeys, chickens and even a micro-brewery. We thought about a vineyard, but that seemed like way too much work, so we decided on dairying which is equally ridiculous. We've only got 160 arable acres here, so whatever we did was always going to be fairly intensive. We had a little texel stud, which is a meat breed, and we visited a sheep dairy in Northcliffe and thought it was pretty cool. We had both gone to Muresk and both worked on properties, so we were quite familiar with sheep. We just liked the idea of it, but that was all that happened for quite some time because the equipment has to come from overseas. It was going to cost hundreds of thousands to set up.

SM: How did you overcome that issue?

NC: We were talking to some researchers at UWA and they had a sheep dairy at Shenton Park. We went up and had a look and they mentioned they had entered into a partnership with a company and built a DeLaval dairy at Dandaragan. It hadn't been working for a number of years. We made some enquiries and they were willing to get rid of it all at a bargain price.

SM: How hard was it to dismantle and get back here?

NC: They wanted it shifted pretty quickly so we scooted up there and looked at it and thought we could do that in a weekend. We then realised it would take more like 20 people and

a week-and-a-half. It was a bit of a mission, but we got it pulled apart and brought back down. The DeLaval guys who set it up there came here and re-built it all and away we went.

SM: Where did the stock come from?

NC: We found the breed of sheep we wanted at the same time. We bought little a herd of East Friesians from the South West and some cross-breeds from around here. We had started breeding those and getting the numbers up so that once the dairy was built, we had the numbers to make a start.

SM: What was the critical number of sheep to make a start?

NC: We had 55. In the beginning we were selling the milk. Chris Vogel over at Dellendale Creamery was making cheese for us. We did that for close to two seasons and that gave us time to build a processing facility and then learn how to make it.

SM: What was it like going from a farming enterprise to being manufacturers?

NC: For a while there we were trying to beat each other to the milking so the other had to do the manufacturing side. I had done a couple of years of a chef's apprenticeship and then realised I didn't really like cooking and had never met a happy chef. This was way before food was "a thing". So I gravitated towards the cheese-making side. I did a few courses and worked with Chris and, once I started to get my head around it, I started to find it really interesting.

SM: What was the bit that captured your attention?



■ Porongurup Pure's Scott and Nicole Clements in their dairy.

NC: It was challenging initially because most of the recipes you work with are cow milk-based. Sheep milk is very different and doesn't behave the same way. The interesting part was getting to know the milk and the science behind it. I'm not a big science buff, but I enjoyed learning about the smells and textures and learning when to cut the curd and when to agitate it less. You're working with science but you're still working with an organic product.

SM: Was there some trial and error?

KS: When things didn't work out, you could go back to the records and identify some variables and work out how you should have done things differently.

SM: Presumably, no two batches of milk are the same, given seasonal cycles?

NC: It's changing all the time. We haven't progressed that much from the ancient days of cheese-making. You know if it is autumn there will be less moisture in the feed, so you know the fats will be different. If the animals are at the end of their lactation they are pumping out the creams and the milk quality changes again. There are so many factors.

SM: What products did you start with?

Scott Clements: We started with a fetta and then a Romano. Once we got a new pasteuriser we could do higher temp work and progress to haloumi

and different sorts of cheddars, Manchego, caerphilly and pecorino.

SM: How many products are there in total now?

NC: With the Jerseys we do milk, three flavoured milks, cream, a cultured butter, natural yoghurt, creamy cheddar which we get smoked, a sharper-style cheddar, our first trial batch of camembert and provolone which is mozzarella's sexy cousin. With the sheep we do three fettas, haloumi, yoghurt, Manchego, caerphilly, Romano and fresh curd.

SM: Any interesting trial products on the horizon?

NC: We want to do a firm blue, probably with the sheep milk, and with the cows we want to work on the white mould cheeses. We want to narrow down and just be good at what we do. That's our goal this year.

SM: Does the range vary at different times?

KS: We're still working on a base range of products, and that's where the Farmers Markets are great because you can trial products. There are some that we're trialled and not progressed with. If it's a very European cheese and Australian tastebuds don't really appreciate it, then let's go with something they like.

SM: It's a bit unusual to see milk being sold in glass bottles. How important is that to your strategy?

NC: We quizzed quite a few people about moving to plastic in two or one-litre bottles and it was an overwhelming "no". People said they bought it because it was a traditional product with the cream on top, and traditional products come in glass. It would have meant a saving but they felt it wouldn't be the same. Someone said if they were buying Grange they wouldn't want it in a cardboard carton.

SM: With the sheep out at the moment and due to lamb, do your Jersey cows help keep the workflow constant?

SC: The cows go 12 months of the year now and the sheep have a break across the road at Duke's Vineyard. We have another block as well, so we can get them off the farm and free up the paddocks for a while. We'll have two or three mobs of sheep come in and they'll lamb two times a year to give us fresh milk for nine months of the year.

SM: What are the challenges in managing the land you have?

SC: Barber's poll worm is the biggest issue we have in terms of husbandry down here, which is why we've set the place up with lots of little paddocks so we can rotate them and minimise the worm carryover. It allows us to get some seed in and provide some early green pick.

SM: What grasses do you sow?

SC: Ryegrass, clover and vetch. We'll try to get them away while it's still warm.

SM: Any perennials?

SC: We've gone away from kike



■ Porongurup Pure's East Friesian ewes and lambs enjoy their surrounds.

because it's pretty much just a gut filler. We trialled some millet this year, like a few others around here, but this summer wasn't very kind for summer cropping. We had one little shower and it didn't rain again afterwards. But it's all pretty straight-forward. We do a lot more hay and silage now and we can store a fair bit and be more self-sufficient.

NC: There's so few products on the market that you can use on milking sheep, so pretty much all the chemical fixes can't be used. That's one of the biggest challenges. We have to hit things quite naturally, so we use a lot of copper and you can go down the path of garlic and apple cider vinegar, but that will also affect the milk. You have to have a bit of a biodynamic hat on.

SC: We have containers with different minerals that they can help themselves to. There's dolomites and seaweed. It's interesting to see what they're targeting. You might think it's disgusting but they'll come along and smash it down in no time at all.

SM: They like seaweed?

SC: We started using seaweed kelp and they just destroy it.

NC: They push out of the gate, walk past the pellets and head straight to the seaweed. We work closely with the vets in town and do a lot of egg counts, especially when you're coming into the change of season which can be a real issue.

SM: Dairying is known to be

notoriously hard work, so how do you maintain your sanity as a family?

NC: Not well! The sheep having that summer holiday is great. That takes the pressure off and it frees up a bit of time. With the cows as well, we can keep the calves on them and leave them in the paddock for a couple of days and we can get away for a weekend.

SM: Is the Farmers Markets the only direct retailing you do?

NC: The milk goes to all the IGAs in Albany, Denmark and a number of other shops like AVEG, Plantagenet

Meats and Bakers Junction. The cheeses are sold much more through the markets because it's hard to compete with the international imports. We tend to focus on that face-to-face interaction with our cheeses and have struggled to keep up this summer.

SM: What opportunities are there to market your products elsewhere?

SC: We're going to be a part of WA Cheese Week which is coming up in May. We've got a number of opportunities in Perth to showcase local cheeses. We hope to get onto some restaurant menus as a result of that. We get really good support from local chefs.

SM: Does the enterprise work well around your family life?

NC: It's been great for us that we're both here and relatively full time with our son Emerson who is 20 months old. That's been pretty special – to be around when he took his first steps and had his first tantrum.

SM: And it's a beautiful part of the world.

SC: Now that it's rained it's nice.

NC: The local support has been amazing. It's a super little community. **S**

