

MEET THE MAKER

Family puts the flavour into milk

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine travelled to Redmond to speak with the Hart family - Peter and Maria and their children Laura and Brian - about the dairy industry and the re-birth of the label Yard 86.

Southerly Magazine: How long has the family been dairying?

Peter Hart: We've been dairying here for 12 years, but the extended family - Maria's side of the family - has been dairying here for 30 years before that. So this was her family farm.

SM: And how did you meet?

PH: In town, in Albany, we were both members of the same church. We got to know each other and that's how it all went.

SM: Were you from a farming background as well?

PH: No, I've got no farming background. I'm a plumber by trade. But I've always been interested in living out of town, living on the land. That's always been an interest for me and just one thing led to another and away we went. After we were married I was plumbing for a while and then we moved away from Albany. We ended up in Byford on a dairy farm for about nine months and then we moved to Bunbury and I worked on a potato and lucerne farm for five years. Then I went plumbing again in Bunbury. We were away from Albany for about 10 years all up. We moved back to Albany and I started up my own plumbing business, did that for about 10 years and then came out here. We seem to do things in 10-year cycles so I'm due for a

change again soon. Overdue!

SM: So when you came to the farm it was a succession thing family-wise?

PH: It was. Maria's parents were getting older and half of the farm was leased to another family member and he's still farming that, running a dairy next door. The father-in-law was looking after this section and it was getting a bit much for him. We were in a position to be able to do something with it so we put our heads together and this is what we've come up with.

SM: Did you stick to the same farming plan with the property or start something new?

PH: When we first came here there were a couple of options. As a preference we probably would have rather done beef, but 12 years ago beef prices were very low and the income wouldn't have paid the costs. So then we looked at dairying and the milk prices were pretty good at the time. Initially, we started off sharing the dairy next door with the brother-in-law and we did that for six years. In the meantime we built our own dairy here, so for the last six years we've been milking in our own dairy. That was a good way to start for us.

SM: With the deregulation of the industry, it still must have been volatile at that time?



PH: It was already deregulated when we first came here, but yes 12 months later the milk prices dropped significantly. And that's when you first started thinking "what have we done?" But it was at a stage where we were in a bit too deep to pull out so what do you do? There were all these different aspects to it, all these different family members who were relying on it to a certain degree, so that was why it took a bit longer to build our own dairy. We were hoping to do that a lot sooner. The volatility hasn't changed in the dairy industry now. One year there'd be confidence because the price would come up a bit. Up until now we've been operating at below margin, underneath

operating costs, and you just can't keep that up.

SM: What sort of dairy did you build?

PH: We built an eight-a-side herringbone dairy - simple and straightforward. The actual operation machinery we managed to pick up second-hand from other dairies. All the steelwork came from a dairy in Brunswick Junction and the milking machines came from Margaret River. It was all in really good condition so we could really just bolt it all in. There were a few changes to be made, of course, but with my plumbing background that was quite handy. It was really good that we could do all the building ourselves.



My dad even got dragged out of retirement. He's a builder by trade and he reckoned he was too old for it, but he did really well.

SM: As it stands, how many cows do you have right now?

Laura Hart: There's around 130-140 in total.

SM: What breed of cows are we talking about?

LH: It's a bit of a mix. Most of them are crossbreeds so we run 25 per cent full Friesian, 10 per cent full Jersey and then 50 per cent is a cross between the two. And there's a little bit of Aussie Red and Ayrshire mixed in as well.

SM: The world knows about Friesian and Jersey cows, but what do the other breeds bring to the table?

LH: The Aussie Reds are very good protein producers. They're an Australian cow and a more compact cow. They're not as small as the Jerseys but they're very tank-like. They're not as quick to fall over. You're trying to build a hardy cow, one that you don't have to replace as often. And the Ayrshires builds more of that hybrid vigour. They're a bit of an all-rounder cow. So there's 123 milking cows, then you've got all the support stuff, so 130 – 140 are the milking dry cows on break, then there's the actual milking herd and then you've got about 50

or 60 heifers coming up. You always have to have replacements coming up. There's always plenty of calves running around. We've got 50 that are less than a month old at the moment. And then there's a few bulls.

SM: What bulls do you run?

LH: We've got two Friesians at the moment. We'll hopefully have an Angus soon as well. We usually put the first-time calvers to the Angus for value-adding.

SM: How many acres are here?

PH: The whole block is 500 acres, and then we also lease another 300 acres next door. So 800 acres all up, and out of that there's about 500 acres of pasture. There's a reasonable amount of bush on this property which is valuable in its way because it does offer a lot of protection from stormy weather and gives the cows a fair bit of shelter.

SM: Do you cut hay and silage?

PH: We cut mainly silage which is our biggest way of storing grass and we do a little bit of hay, not a lot. There's not really a lot of pasture here for that. We're still working the pasture up. We're building up the right grass for dairy.

SM: To do that, what work goes into managing the soils?

PH: We regularly soil test to get a good idea of what's going on in the soil. Two years ago the Ag Department came out and soil tested the whole farm so that's given us some really good results and some really good soil maps as well. Soils down here are naturally acidic anyway, so you have to use your lime. We try to do a rotation around the property, a bit of lime, and we don't over-fertilise. We don't put too much on, mainly as a cost thing, but we put our phosphate and potash fertilisers on. This year, we actually put our phosphate fertiliser on in spring and we mixed it with our nitrogen fertilisers as well and because of the beautiful rain that we've had it's really paid off. It's been an exceptional year, the best we've had since we've gotten here

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actually, and rain-wise it's the best rain we've had for four or five years. So silage production has been triple to last year and we've been able to cut a bit of hay this year which we hadn't been able to do last year. And the regrowth is still growing. It hasn't been that hot yet so that grass that is still growing hasn't gone to head yet. So from the fertiliser point of view, we put in a lot of saia oats last autumn as well, which are an old heritage variety which does well here. We mix it with ryegrass varieties as a pasture as well as a feed option for the silage. It makes good silage. And that's regrowing, and there's some paddocks that we might be able to get a second cut off.

SM: What sort of volume of milk have you been producing?

PH: It fluctuates throughout the year because of the milk prices. You try to aim for higher production in the summer months because that's when the milk price goes up. In summer you're sitting on around 2,200 litres a day. In winter it drops down to about 1,500 litres. That's also because you calve at different times of the year. We're calving now so that milk will come through in December/January. In winter there's also fewer animals in the herd so naturally the production falls off.

Brian Hart: We average around 660,000 litres a year.

SM: And when did the value-adding aspect start getting raised?

PH: That's been something we've been interested in right from the word go – value adding and getting the customer a bit more involved in the process, to have a bit more of a personal relationship with the end user.

SM: And the drop in those prices must have necessitated that discussion anyway?

PH: It really did. And to try and increase our turnover in a way, that's what it's really about. It would have been nice if we could have sent it all in the tanker to Perth at a reasonable dollar for us to be able to make ends meet, but it just hasn't been like that. It's been something we've been interested in, and really wanting to do it was pushed because of the price. An opportunity came up for us to purchase this existing business at around the same time.

SM: What did the business look like at that time?

PH: It was in mothballs. It hadn't been operated for a couple of years, so basically we were purchasing all of the bits as well as the Yard 86 name. That name had been out there and people knew it so the name was part of the deal. There were the cows that also came with the deal. I've known the previous owners for a long time. We talked about it and I thought it was something I would really like to do. We started talking about it, here over the table, and said yeah, let's see if we can make it work. That was in 2018 and it took another year or more to get it up and running. In July 2020 we started.

SM: What was required to get it running?

PH: We had to build a shed so we could put the processing plant in. There was also Health Department requirements, food safety plans and all of those things had to be dealt with first.

SM: How does the process work from cow to bottle?

BH: The milk comes straight from the dairy and we pump it straight into the pasteuriser. We have another vat in there we can pump it into if we're storing it overnight or to keep it cold. Once it's in the pasteuriser, it goes up to 63 degrees for half an hour and then it gets cooled down again using water. Water gets pumped around it and that brings it down to about 15 degrees. From there we pump it into a small tank that's got a tap on it and we fill bottles up from there, manually. While it's pasteurising we put all the labels on the bottles.

SM: And from there, what's the distribution chain?

BH: We put it in the back of our refrigerated ute and take it to Albany and Denmark. We're in all IGAs in both Denmark and Albany, AVEG, Reeves, Royale, Nourish Organics and Baker's Junction.

SM: Do any products go outside the region?



■ Healthy pastures are the secret behind the flavoursome milk of Yard 86.



■ Another early start to the day for Brian Hart in the family dairy.

PH: No, not at this stage.

SM: How many flavoured milks do you do?

BH: At the moment it's three – coffee, choc and mocha. Mocha is only over the summer months, and over the rest of the season we just stick with coffee and choc. There's more demand; we sell quite a lot more coffee and choc than we do mochas.

LH: Demand for flavoured milk also drops over winter because people don't really want a cold drink on a cold day.

SM: How do you source the other ingredients?

BH: We get ground coffee beans from Beck and Call. We soak them in cold water overnight and get a cold brew coffee mix and from there we mix it straight into the milk. We mix 400g sugar for 25 litres, so very little sugar, and that gets put into bottles and ends up on the shelf in the shop.

PH: It's locally roasted coffee beans so it's a very local product. That's what we were interested in – trying to keep it as local as possible. The coffee is fresh every week too. He grinds it up for us every week so we don't have any bulk storage here for coffee grinds. That's what's good about a fairly small operation, you can do that, you can use a local service. That's what we're pushing.

SM: What about the chocolate?

BH: That's just Cadbury Drinking Chocolate. We mix it with hot water just to dissolve it, and straight into the milk. No extra sugar or anything else.

SM: And the mocha?

BH: The mocha is just the chocolate and the coffee mixed together. It's pretty basic.

SM: While it's still early days, have you looked at any other flavours?

BH: Once we get time up our sleeves we'll probably get into strawberry. We're not sure other than that.

SM: And with Handasyde's around the corner with their freeze-drying machine, they can produce powder 12 months a year.

LH: Yep, we've had that thought!

SM: Of the milk you're producing, are there different types?

BH: Just straight full-cream milk.

LH: It's as close to straight cow's milk that you can get. Just pumped through the pasteuriser to the bottles. It's not homogenised. Nothing has been added or taken out.

BH: It's a lot fresher than other shop milk as well. It comes out of the cow in the morning, is pasteurised and can then be on the shelf in the afternoon.

LH: I think it comes out of the cow around 6am in the morning and then it's on the shelves by 12. So it's pretty fresh.

SM: So what does your working day look like?

BH: We usually start about 5.30am – 6.00am, depending on how many cows we're milking at the time. Milking finishes about 8am roughly. We have



■ Peter Hart applies the Yard 86 labels.

smoko while the pasteuriser is going and then once we've finished smoko we're bottling up until about lunchtime. Then after lunch we have a bit of rest for a while and then we start milking again at 2pm.

LH: We only really need two people in the factory so the other people are doing other farm work. It's only Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday that we milk now.

SM: Percentage-wise, what amount of milk goes to the shops and what on the trucks?

LH: Because we do 1,500 to 2,000 litres per day and we don't have the capacity or the sales, and the pasteuriser only holds 270 litres, it does depend on the demand. On Mondays we take away 270 litres to the shops, so that's a whole pasteurise, and then the rest goes to the factory in Perth. It fluctuates between 150 – 270 during the rest of the week.

SM: Being a seven-day-a-week scenario and there being only four of you, how do you manage it?

PH: It's tricky. Before we started with the processing plant it wasn't so bad, we were having every second weekend off. Maria and I would work one weekend, and Brian and Laura the other. But with the processing now and the Farmer's Markets on Saturday that rotation hasn't worked. We can't be in two places at once. We like to have two people at the market so one of Laura's friends steps in and helps us with that so between the three of them they work out who will work there, and Maria and I work here. We still try and get a day off every so often but

it's not happening at the moment because the cows are calving. It's very busy. It's seven days a week for all of us.

LH: We have another sister in Perth and she has three kids, so we're waiting for them to grow up! Kathryn's husband is a graphic designer so we get lots of help from him. The whole family is invested.

PH: It is something we think about, labour-wise, because we can't keep doing seven days a week, it's not sustainable. We've actually recently just started working on a succession plan and that's highlighted a lot of things to consider for the future.

SM: Since COVID has hit, particularly, there's been a lot of artisan things going on – cheese-making classes and things like that. Who are some of the more interesting customers who take your products?

BH: We just picked up Monty's Leap, the winery, who are just holding functions at the moment.

LH: Also Evolved Wellbeing have started using us for their cheese courses. We deliver it on the way to the Farmer's Markets on Saturday for her to run her course that morning. She says it makes great cheese. The Green Pantry in Denmark also uses us in their coffees. It's interesting as well just knowing the local customer base. We have regulars who came really quickly from the Albany Farmer's Market and it's always great to have a good chat with them. It is a great chance to talk about our product and hear some stories. If you just deliver it the big supermarkets then that's it, it just kind of stops. The milk's on the shelf and off it goes to the next fridge but now people are genuinely interested in what we do.

SM: In this age, it seems people want to know more about the names of the cows, where they came from, what the paddock looks like – and that can only be a good thing?

LH: Definitely. We used to hang photos in our stall of one of our cows called Jolly, a big red cow. But then we had to change the layout of the stall. In the first week we changed it, someone asked where Jolly had gone.

SM: If you could choose only one of your products, what would it be and how would you have it?

PH: It would be the milk. But not straight milk, but on breakfast cereal.

BH: Probably the mocha and coffee. A mixture of them both.

LH: The cream. Definitely. It's so light and fluffy and is so good on cake. Especially mum's banana cake.

PH: If Maria were here she would probably say the milk. Milk has been such a big part of her upbringing.

SM: For all the hard work, is dairying still a good life?

PH: It is. It's just hard work.

LH: But it's in the small things really. Because you've always got milk, you've always got cows calving but when you stop and watch a cow calve, it's actually really cool. You have interaction with a cow, that's me anyway. You always stop and make time to pat the cows. There's a few that you just have to pat. They'll follow you around until you do. Calving is very hectic, very busy, but I always look for the positives. If you get stuck on the negatives, on the long hours and hard work, it won't work. But if you look out for another calf in the paddock, then straight away you get a different mindset.

BH: I like making the hay and silage but I love the calves as well. I like seeing them when they're healthy and growing up, looking after them.

PH: It's a bit of a rollercoaster, it really is. Some days you're under the pump and you really feel it. Things like, once again, bringing up calves is special. We've got 50 new calves this month and with every single one of them you think, wow how about that? That wow factor doesn't go away. At the moment as well, because the cows have been on good feed, the calves are coming out a nice size. They're all healthy and they're doing really well. You also think about the individual cows. We have 130 cows but each one has their own personality and that shows in so many different ways. So that side of it is really special. Being able to work with the family and the kids, that's also something that I really treasure. **S**

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