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Agribusiness

CASE STUDY:

Milking Yard Farm

As part of the Regenerative Agriculture project undertaken in conjunction with Deakin University, five best practice case studies were developed based on interviews with regenerative agriculture practitioners.





Background

Milking Yard Farm is a boutique producer of truly free-range broiler chicken. Unlike traditional static free-range systems, the chickens at Milking Yard Farm are moved through the paddocks to ensure access to fresh pasture at all times.

The birds are run at very low densities of less than 150 birds per hectare. This ensures the animals have a clean, healthy environment with access to pastures and insects to supplement the nutrition they receive from grain. It also keeps the animals naturally pest free and fertilises the pastures.

The birds are kept on grass from a very early age, with brooding pens including heat sources also being kept at pasture. This results in a bird that forages from a very young age. Two Maremma's – Italian Sheep Dogs – defend the flock from predators, which mainly consist of foxes and birds of prey.

Fast Facts

Owner / Business:

Bruce and Ros Burton
Milking Yard Farm

Key Farm Outputs:

Free range chicken meat

Age:

60 years

Generation:

5th and 7th generation with a history of beef cattle farming. Bruce and Ros grew up on the Queensland border between Stanthorpe and Tenterfield and have returned to farming after professional careers outside the sector.

Location:

Trentham East, Central Highlands Region, Victoria

Size of farm:

20ha

Established:

2009 property purchased. 2014 chickens introduced.

Employment:

Two people full time, two people part time (total 3 FTE)

Rainfall:

900mm. 10-year average.

Soil Type:

Trentham red volcanic

Land Tenure:

Freehold

Key Markets:

Restaurants, butchers, online direct sales, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program involving 40 families. Additional subscriptions are accepted when there is capacity.



Need for change



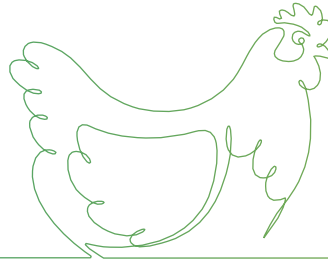
Bruce's key inspiration for the design and ethical basis of the farming operation is the concept of Permaculture.

"I have been learning about the principles of permaculture for many years, initially inspired by the Permaculture Designers Manual and since having done multiple courses and reading. It makes fundamental sense to use good design underpinned by ecological principles to create farming systems that work with nature and allow the animals innate behaviours to be expressed and be of benefit to the system."

"We are conscious of doing all we can to be regenerative in our farming approach. We use no chemicals or synthetic fertilisers. The feed sourced is non-GMO. We don't use antibiotics. Our packaging is either returnable, reusable or compostable. We have planted out a significant portion of the farm to both indigenous and exotic trees for fodder, shelter and biodiversity, and we plan to plant more."

"It is also the longer-term aim to stack additional synergistic enterprises on the property, once the chicken enterprise is firmly established. We are always looking for ways to improve the sustainability of our operation and reduce our impact."

Innovative approach



The enterprise is based on Sommerlad genetics. These birds have been specially bred from heritage genetics for outdoor, free range, organic production systems like that run at Milking Yard Farm. They were originally bred by Michael Sommerlad from 2001 in a response to the narrow broiler genetics present in the modern chicken production industry, which essentially relies on two remaining, highly bred meat strains.

These birds have been bred for rapid growth and feed conversion, at the expense of resilience and natural foraging abilities. As a result, they are ill suited to forage based, free range operations and a new strain suited to the innovative growing system needed to be developed.

The Sommerlad chicken fills that gap. It is specially bred for Australian conditions from a combination of a number of heritage breeds with the famous table bird, the “Poulet de Bresse” of France as an inspiration.

“The chicken produced at Milking Yard farm is a distinctly different eating experience to an industrially produced bird. Putting it bluntly – it tastes like chicken. The taste is a reflection of the slower growth, the ideal animal welfare conditions and the environment the animal is grown in.”

The evidence of the difference in quality and taste is the response from the culinary community. Milking Yard Farm has won the National Delicious Awards in 2015 and 2016, and the State Delicious Awards in 2018 and 2019. They have also been recognized with the 2016 Australian Food Awards Champion Poultry Trophy. The quality and reputation of their product has made them sought after by some of the best restaurants in Victoria, noted as “the best bird in the business” by Alla Wolf-Tasker, Lakehouse, Daylesford.

At any given time, there are approximately 1,500 growers and 300 breeders on the farm. These are managed from hatch to customer on the farm, with only the processing occurring off site. Bruce identifies this processing as a key risk point for the industry and its expansion.

“Currently there is only one processor available to small growers. This is a significant risk to the longevity of the industry. If this processor closes down, then those relying on them will be without options. On-farm processing would be the ultimate solution for this and would offer far superior animal welfare and allow the farmer to be in control of the final product, but the current regulations for on-farm processing make it almost impossible for small farms to consider.”

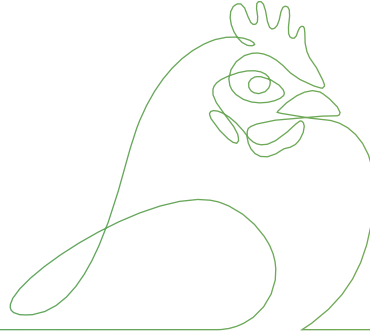
Certification

The chicken enterprise is certified by PROOF – Pasture Raised on Open Fields (<https://www.proof.net.au/>).

“The PROOF certification ensures that we are fully transparent with our farm’s animal welfare and sustainability. Customers can count on this independently assessed standard and know that they are supporting a genuine product”



Operational Information



Local Government Authority:

Hepburn Shire

Planning Controls:

Farming Zone (FZ); Bushfire Management Overlay (BMO) (partial); Environmental Significance Overlay (ESO1); Areas of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Sensitivity (Waterways); Adjacent to Rural Conservation Zone (RCZ) and Vegetation Protection Overlay (VPO).

Percentage of land utilized:

25 percent for chickens. Remainder grazed or mulched.

Percentage of land for biodiversity:

10-15 percent utilised. Aiming for more than 20 percent over time.

Proportion of income:

100 percent. All profits are reinvested in the farm at this stage, including labour, infrastructure development and marketing to increase market share. Costs are high but we are growing the business and growing the market.

Pasture base:

Improved species – rye grass, sub clovers, clovers, Lucerne, phalaris, cocksfoot.

Marketing approach:

Social media, website and blog, direct customer contact. Winner Delicious Awards national 2015 and 2016; state 2018 and 2019.

Volunteer use:

None

Open to public:

By appointment and occasional events.

Farming framework:

Permaculture

Certification (eg. Organic):

PROOF (<https://www.proof.net.au/>)

Transitioned (year):

2009

Other products (household):

Fruit and vegetables, eggs.

Question and Answer

Q. What benefits have you found in a regenerative approach to farming?

A. *There have been a number of notable observations since transitioning the property to a regenerative agriculture approach.*

There has been a great increase in pasture growth and diversity. The chicken manure increase in organic matter and agitation from the birds stimulates the soils biological activity. Pasture hangs on for longer in summer than the neighbours due to better soil moisture retention. There was a particularly noticeable difference from the second year to the neighbouring paddocks.

It has been amazing to observe the diversity of wildlife in the tree plantings. Huge flocks of finches and wrens, we have cuckoos – birdlife has significantly increased. An increase in frog numbers and diversity has also been observed and heard!

The business is a lot of work, but people value our commitment to our animals and the land we farm. They are not only buying chicken, but they are being a part of making a difference.

Q. What have been your biggest farming challenges?

A. *The hours are long and whilst we have been establishing the business, there has been a lack of balance. Farming can be very isolating and – even on small properties close to the Melbourne fringe – loneliness can be an issue.*

The way we have chosen to farm can also be isolating as we are forging new territory. We are doing things differently and are having to figure things out as we go. There is no real mentor, no partner in the business – no sounding board. It is a professional loneliness which has been very challenging.

Q. What has been your biggest farming achievement?

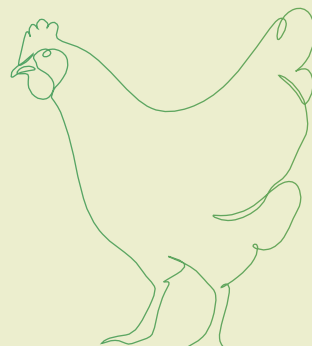
A. *The response of the soils and land to the chickens – it has been great to watch just how beneficial this farming approach has been. I am especially proud of the trees we have planted and the wildlife and biodiversity response. These areas are also now habitat for our roosters which is very close to their native forest environment. The animals are very happy there.*

Q. What are the biggest industry challenges faced by yourself and other producers?

A. *The changing climate is our biggest industry challenge, hands down. It's getting hotter and drier. We have already seen the impacts of climate change on the farm and that gives me even more motivation to improve our systems to both reduce our climate impact and increase our resilience.*

Lack of processors and a lack of alternative forms of processing is also an issue. With only one processor and the regulations prohibitive to small, on farm processing systems, setting up an alternative is cost prohibitive and could end up with excellent, viable small businesses being forced out of business. It's a significant risk.

The rise of militant veganism is another growing problem facing the farming industry. It is most concerning because it shows a clear disconnect between the problem and the solution of animals in agriculture.



Q. What have been your biggest business challenges?

A. *It has been a real challenge convincing enough people that there is an alternative to factory produced chicken and for them being willing to pay a realistic price for it. Convincing them to take the leap from paying \$4/kg for chicken meat to \$30/kg takes some work, but that's the real cost of raising chicken ethically. We need to move enough volume to keep the product moving out the door and keep the business viable. We are making slow progress, but if those people with the right outlook hear the story and taste the product, they will generally come over the line. It is however, as chicken always used to be before industrial farming, seen as a special occasion dish.*

Q. What has been your biggest business achievement?

A. *We have created over the last five years a differentiated chicken product. We are extremely proud of spearheading this new segment of the market that no one thought could exist. And if imitation is a form of flattery – monster industrial farming companies are looking to emulate the genetics of slow growing heritage breeds in pasture raised systems.*

Q. Who have been your mentors?

A. *I don't have any direct mentors I regularly work with face to face, but I have taken much direction from Bill Mollison and David Holmgren's writings on permaculture. I have also taken a lot from the approach of Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm.*

Q. What are your most influential texts?

A. *The Permaculture Designer's Manual by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren
Joel Salatin's suite of books*

Q. What actions have you taken to increase your climate resilience?

A. *The entire farming system and approach is geared towards building climate resilience. We are planting trees to increase terrestrial carbon as well as shade and cool paddocks. Carbon sequestration through pasture management and healthy soils. We have invested in solar power. Our packaging is reusable or compostable and is made from natural products, such as the wool insulating blankets. Climate is a consideration in everything we do here at Milking Yard Farm.*

Q. Why do you do what you do?

A. *We want to make chicken great again!*

We worry deeply about the future for our children and grandchildren. It motivates us to do what we can to make a difference while creating an oasis of food, water and energy independence.

Q. What are your plans for the future?

A. *We are working hard to build an ethical, sustainable business and will continue to do that into the future. We hope once the chickens are really bedded down then we will add additional synergistic enterprises, such as beef cattle. We will continue to build towards energy, water and food independence with the aim of leaving a legacy of a climate resilient property for our children and grandchildren.*



What is Permaculture?

Permaculture – an amalgam of “permanent” and “agriculture” – it is a framework that aims to produce just that, and more. It was developed in collaboration between David Holmgren and Bill Mollison in Tasmania during the 1970’s. Since that time, it has spread throughout the world.

At its essence, Permaculture is a design framework that aims to mimic the relationships and patterns in nature to support the development of truly sustainable communities with minimal unnecessary consumption and waste, and with a heightened consciousness to the needs of all. The approach establishes “thinking tools, that when used together, allow us to creatively re-design our environment and our behaviour in a world of less energy and resources”.

Permaculture is guided by three core ethics – **care of the earth, care of people and fair share**. The twelve design principles inform action and the seven domains describe where action should be taken.

This central framework then delves into details in many different areas of life. The concepts are now very mature, with many practitioners around the world with a range of publications exploring these core tenants. Permaculture Designers Courses are a key part of upskilling practitioners in the framework. There are also multiple texts on the subject, ranging from the original “Permaculture One” and the “Permaculture Designers Manual” through to the recently released “Retrosuburbia”, authored by David Holmgren. David is based at his permaculture demonstration property, Melliodora, in Hepburn and continues to offer education and development on the concept.

We would like to acknowledge that the information contained within this case study is the intellectual property of Milking Yard Farm.

Useful Links

<https://permacultureprinciples.com/>
<https://holmgren.com.au/>
<https://www.milkwood.net/>
<https://www.veryediblegardens.com.au/>

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