

INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE - A WINNING COMBO

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE



2015

Ask Richard Weston whether it's harder to run a farm or a cafe and he laughs, "It'd be a good debate to have."

One he has perhaps had with himself, because along with wife Belinda and 14-year-old twin sons Lloyd and Campbell, he juggles both Weston Farm in Brighton and the Pigeon Hole cafe in West Hobart.

"With farming you are dealing with the elements, nature and unpredictability, but with hospitality you're trying to fulfil customer expectations. They both have their challenges and they both have very long hours."

These dual roles of farming and hospitality are a far cry from his childhood growing up in the suburbs of Hobart. Yet Richard and Belinda have managed what many only dream of - a tree change that turned into a career as well as a lifestyle.

The couple began, as many do, with a desire to raise a family and live a simple, rural life. "We bought five hectares of agricultural land just out of Hobart and planted peony roses to sell to the cut-flower industry and olives to produce oil," Richard explained. "For family use, we established a large vegetable garden and raised chickens and pigs."

It was all very idyllic and perhaps predictable, until the day their friend Luke Burgess (owner of former iconic restaurant Garagistes)

turned up at the back door. "He took one look at our vegetable patch and asked if we could grow a bit extra for him. He wanted unusual produce to serve in his restaurant but was struggling to find farmers willing to try growing something a bit different."

Fast forward a few years, and Weston Farm now grows an ever-changing selection of niche produce enjoyed by patrons in many of Tasmania's best restaurants, as well as its own inner-city cafe.

"Because of the nature of our farm, we're able to play around with different vegetables and see if they grow ... see what happens. We're experimenting all the time and that's the driver for me."

White asparagus production is one such area of experimentation and three years ago Richard was awarded a Nuffield Scholarship to travel the world and study its commercial production. He has since acquired 24,000 white asparagus seeds and has plans for Weston Farm to sow and trial the crop very soon.

It may be twice the workload, but running a farm and cafe has given Richard a behind-the-scenes look at Tasmania's two major industries - agriculture and hospitality. And whilst the two are without doubt intrinsically inter-connected, they don't always communicate well. His suggestion is for hospitality training to link in with agricultural

training, encouraging farmers and chefs to work together for the end product.

For Richard, the end of an outdoor week on the farm is followed by a Saturday spent indoors washing dishes at the cafe. "I enjoy it," he laughs.

"It gives me an insight into how my product is being used and helps me to grow what the chefs are looking for. You know - whether they would prefer more baby vegetables, larger vegetables or root vegetables."

"This two-way feedback between paddock and plate is instrumental to what Richard decides to grow and what the local restaurants can produce from it."

But chefs have a great sense of humour," he smiles. "You can bet the one item you've grown the least of will be the one they want to put on the menu!" But he does occasionally manage to turn the tables and surprise them. Like when he discovered that Tasmania was the perfect place to grow alma paprika.

"We've experimented over the last three years by first growing paprika in tunnels and then planting 580 out in the open. They grew very well - almost as well as under plastic - and we've been able to produce half a tonne of smoked and sweet paprika this year."

It seems amazing that cool Tasmania can grow commercial amounts of paprika. "We misunderstand our climate here in Tasmania," says Richard. "It's often our expectation of what we can grow that limits us. We have a good climate. If we don't experiment and try then we won't know what we can actually grow. "Integrating the current 'go to Tassie for food' message into a cohesive tourism and hospitality experience could build our export market."

The cafe has made it clear to Richard that as tourists return home from an enjoyable holiday, they look for ways to re-create it - eating food that is identifiably Tasmanian provides a sensory way for them to do this.

"Part of peoples' experience is to visit Tassie and get the best produce - a large segment of our cafe clientele are tourists - and as a result we have a wonderful following on the mainland.

A small farm such as Richard's has diversified in order to survive. "If you only grow one item and then find there's a sudden glut in the market, it means lower sale prices - and that's farming - but it means we farmers must diversify and value-add in order to make a profit.

"I once counted five garlic growers at a local farmers' market, so that's getting pretty tight for each to make a profit. But if they're growing a range of produce then it won't hit them so hard financially."

Spreading risk and minimising waste through value-adding is standard procedure at Weston Farm. "We use our excess fresh produce to make a range of preserves, plus we sell our olive oil, peony roses and now the paprika, and one day hopefully some white asparagus."

There's no doubt that agriculture is a challenge, with the uncertainty of elements and profit margins



putting many people off a farming career. "There's a myth in Australia that you need thousands of acres to be a successful farmer," explains Richard, noting that within the European Union, 70% of all farms are less than eight hectares in size.

"I'll hold Holland up as an example again. They're a country smaller than Tasmania with 17 million people, yet the year I was there they exported €25billion worth of horticultural and agricultural products. No land is wasted.

"It's hard to imagine having a vacant 15 acres of land just 20 minutes from the CBD of Sydney - but we do have that availability near our CBD in Tasmania. This fringe agricultural land is the land to buy for those looking to get into small-scale farming. But it's frustrating that even here our prime agricultural land can be too expensive to be viable. For instance in Brighton, 'intensive agriculture' zoned land is selling for \$20,000 a hectare. That places it amongst the most expensive land in Australia and it's all due to pressure from housing."

Canada has devised its own way to address the twin issues of affordability and lack of young people within agriculture. "Apparently if you're young enough, you can apply for a 30-year loan fixed at around 3% interest to help you buy a farm."

This ties in with Richard's belief that people hoping - as he once did - for a tree change with an income, should do so when they're young rather than putting it off as a retirement dream. "Farming is hard work. I think the ideal age to begin would be between 25 and 40 years of age."

That said, he refuses to put any pressure on his boys to one day take over Weston Farm. "This is my and Belinda's dream. If they want to follow in our footsteps that will be great, but Belinda also runs a busy architectural practice so they may want to do that.

Cafes are hard work so I don't think they're so enthusiastic about that side because at the moment all they want to do is eat and sleep! But at least they're food aware and recognise quality produce when they see and taste it."

At the Pigeon Hole cafe, it's hard to miss the fact that most of the food served is grown on its own farm. The menus proudly declare so and staff take pride explaining how the food was grown and the stories that make each component special. Celebrating the relationships between growers, chefs and consumers creates an experience that is more than just a meal.

"All of our food waste is sent back to the farm where it is composted and used to grow more produce. It's a sustainable cycle and one I'd like to see our hospitality industry do better.

"We've all got to protect Tasmania's reputation of growing clean, green, quality produce," says Richard. "Because if we ever lose this reputation we will never get it back."

See the whole story at www.nrmsouth.org.au/naturally-inspired-newsletter-winter-2015/