

# ROUND THE FARM TABLE

Chef and good keen man Al Brown chats to BFEA entrants from around the country and finds they're committed to sustainable farming – and growing delicious food.

Meet Waikato dairy farmer Johan Van Ras and you'll be greeted with a big handshake and an even bigger smile. With a positive attitude and a keen sense of humour, it's clear he enjoys life. Something undoubtedly passed on by Johan's father Richard, who with wife Truus also lives and works on the farm.

"Dad always said that you can only eat your bellyful, so always be happy with what you have," says Johan.

And what he and wife Kylie – who grew up on a sheep and beef farm near Ngāruawāhia – have on their Waiorongomai Valley Farm is something special. The family purchased the 76-hectare farm in 2010 after leasing a farm for six years. With open minds, the van Ras' are constantly looking at ways to improve the stock health of their 215 cows, mitigate environmental impact and balance sustainability with profitability.

It's a clear recipe for success with the family named 2021 Regional Supreme Winners in the recent Waikato Ballance Farm Environment Awards.

A result that, inevitably, put even bigger smiles on Johan's and Kylie's faces.

**Al: Tell us about your philosophy here at Waiorongomai Valley Farms.**

**Johan:** Owning your own land builds a connection that's hard to explain. We are 100% committed to looking after our environment so we can produce food for future generations to come.

**Kylie:** Our main motivation – other than Whittaker's chocolate – is just doing the right thing. There's nothing like sleeping well at night knowing you've done something that will benefit others for the long term.

**Al: What sort of work have you done around the farm to help protect the land?**

**Johan:** As an ongoing project we've planted 11,000 natives in a 4.5ha wetlands/ bush area we knew wouldn't be that productive. Next step is a weekend cabin there with hot tub!

We've also focused on water sampling in smaller connected waterways and giving technology a real crack to improve all aspects of the farm.

**Kylie:** Monitoring data using GPS tracking maps makes a huge impact on fertiliser use efficiency. Planting makes a visible difference, but the technology makes a financial difference and will contribute to the environment in the long-term.

**Al: Three generations on the farm is pretty special. How has that evolved?**

**Kylie:** When Richard and Truus arrived 30-odd years ago from Holland they didn't speak a word of English. Richard became a farm hand, then a sharemilker. Truus worked many off-farm jobs and they eventually saved enough for a farm in Te Aroha.

**Johan:** To make their dream come to life required a real partnership which I am lucky to also have to this day with them and Kylie, who really is a legend – easily swapping roles as a vet, wife, mother, business partner and general voice of reason.

**Al: And you all still enjoy working together, which is the impressive part.**

**Johan:** We do. Dad's lost the ability to sleep in though and every morning he comes down to the milking shed for a bit of a chinwag. We're always bouncing ideas off each other – and he's always telling me he should be fishing!

**Kylie:** Everything we have achieved has been done together, which our daughter Dana and son Blake will really begin to understand as they grow up. Three generations – we feel hugely proud, lucky and humbled to have this opportunity.

**Al: Fantastic. So why did you decide to enter the Ballance Farm Environment Awards?**

**Johan:** After reaching 10 years on the farm, Kylie and I talked about wanting a snapshot of where we were, and we should be going.

**Kylie:** We felt the time was right for a fresh perspective and an honest appraisal of the whole business.

**Al: And did you get that?**

**Johan:** That and more. We were blown away by the judging and it has opened our eyes to other amazing farms and different perspectives. The other week we went

## Nº12

Kylie and Johan van Ras, daughter Dana 8, son Blake 12 and Johan's parents, Richard and Truus. Dairy Farmers, Waiorongomai Valley Farms, Te Aroha, Waikato (76ha, 215 cows)

WITH

*Al Brown*

to a field day for Pūniu River Care on their marae, following their recent BFEA catchment group win.

It was a privilege to listen to local hapū, involved in the restoration of the Pūniu River, talk to the idea of kaitiaki. It really resonated with us and what we are trying to do on the farm.

**Al: Ka rawe! Since the awards have you made any changes?**

**Kylie:** Following some great advice, we have already added quite a lot of native tree shelter belts for shade in summer and wind blocking in winter.

**Johan:** We've also joined with a few other farmers to start looking after our local Waiharakeke River, improving connected waterways upstream before they reach major rivers, and the Piako Catchment Forum who are doing great local initiatives.

**Al: What does the future hold for New Zealand agriculture?**

**Johan:** It's about community. From rural to urban we are all bound by our waterways, so working together is where we will see the biggest benefits.

**Kylie:** In doing so, as a country we can become superstars for high value sustainable, transparently produced food from farm to fork.

**Al: Ok what's your favourite food that comes off this land?**

**Kylie:** All our milk goes to Tatua. They make the best sour cream in the world and amazing mascarpone!

**Johan:** And you can't beat grabbing a can of dairy whip cream and squirting it straight into your mouth. Not that I'd ever do that. (Haha!)

But seriously you can't beat Kylie's creamy chicken pie and her lemon meringue pie for pud.

**Al: Who doesn't love a pie or two! Ok so who's popping over for this pie feast?**

**Kylie:** Family of course and we've got lots of great friends in the district so they'd have to be there.

**Johan:** And I'd love to add Ricky Gervais and Taika Waititi for some serious laughs and Dave Grohl for some musical interlude in between the laughs. I think we'd sing well together after a couple...



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