

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.

Arriving at Frances and Geordie Eade's sheep and beef farm in the rarely travelled Pourakino Valley near Riverton, could leave you feeling pretty isolated.

But that's one thing the Eades themselves certainly aren't. In fact, connecting with other farmers and whānau on a regular basis is a huge part of their incredibly successful operation, where they run 2700 sheep and 82 beef on a stunning piece of land made up of semi-rolling hills, river flats and fenced-off native bush.

"Farming can be hard, and even harder when you're trying to do everything yourself," says Frances.

"She is my rock," adds Geordie of Frances. "We also have my parents nearby and I'm also part of a catchment group of over 40 landowners from around the area which is an incredible forum to share and learn together."

It's this openness to learn and share knowledge that judges highlighted as they awarded the Eades the Southland Regional Supreme Winners title at the Ballance Farm Environment Awards last year.

And it's an approach that is also helping the pair achieve their goal of creating a generational operation that balances sustainability with high productivity.

Al Brown sits with them to find out a little more.

Al: So how did you end up here?

Frances: Geordie grew up on a sheep and beef farm 10km down the road before heading to Lincoln University. I was nursing in Christchurch at the time. The call back to the land was incredibly strong for Geordie.

Geordie: In 2001 my parents bought Granity Downs. We initially leased the land off them and eventually bought the whole property in 2011.

Al: Are your parents still involved?

Geordie: Dad was a bricklayer before deciding to pack it in and get onto the land. He was open to trying new things, and wasn't bound by the idea of how things 'should' be done. He still loves being involved in his role as 'Chief Maintenance Officer'.

Al: As the second generation farmers here, the land has obvious importance.

How are you looking after it?

Frances: We see ourselves as caretakers of the property – not owners – so we've

fenced off most of the 29ha of native bush and maintained the stream through the property. We've seen a huge return of birdlife in the area. Geordie The land itself is beautiful but not without its own challenges. Our climate gets lots of rainfall which affects sediment runoff. So we've made 10 metre buffer zones on winter crops to mitigate this, and sheep are moved every three days, rather than daily, which means less sediment movement and run-off.

Al: Are you constantly thinking about new ways that can make a difference?

Frances: Always. Early on Geordie realised that that if you don't record something, how can you improve it, so he's fanatical about soil testing and using the data to make sure everything is kept in balance.

Geordie: Technology is important but sometimes so is good old Kiwi ingenuity.

I use the sheep's ear tag to record information and can tell their whole story just by looking at the markings I've made on them.

Al: Tell us more about the catchment group you're part of.

Frances: Geordie helped establish the catchment group in 2014 to collaborate and share ideas from a good mixture of farms that include dairy, sheep and beef and even forestry.

Geordie: We discuss everything from equipment to new techniques; from farm environment plans to mental health. We host field days, and seek advice and knowledge from other experts. We have just done a stream walk with ecologists from Environment Southland to get a different perspective on how our water systems work.

Al: Did you find you got what you wanted out of the BFEA process?

Frances: The process was easy and the judges were incredibly helpful. Our neighbours did well a couple of years back and got so much value out of them, so we thought; let's give it go!

Geordie: We view farming as a professional career and always strive to follow best practice in caring for our land and environment. So it was important to us to see if we matched up to other top producers in the region.

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Geordie and Frances Eade with children Martha (14), Georgia (9) and Louis (7). Sheep and beef farmers, Granity Downs (259 ha), Pourakino Valley, Southland.

WITH

Al Brown

Al: What have you experienced as a result of entering the Awards that you didn't expect?

Frances: Due to the pandemic we got to watch the winner's announcement via live feed with our three children, Geordie's parents and our employee, Alex DeLay which was a very proud moment for us all.

Geordie: Probably being in front of a camera. I remember a mate saying, "Every time I light the fire with newspaper I see your mug on it!" But seriously our win has had a really positive effect on our whole community which is a great reminder of our responsibility to keep the many great farming stories in the public eye.

Al: So what's does the future look like for the industry?

Geordie: We have amazing stories to tell. The opportunity is to tell them in meaningful ways. Imagine within 10 years someone in Germany scanning a pack of NZ lamb in a supermarket and instantly being able to find out not only the country, but the farm and even the farmer behind it. That's hugely exciting.

Al: Sure is! Now, the important stuff - what's your favourite food off the farm?

Geordie: Can't wait to try your beef carpaccio recipe Al, but you haven't lived until you've eaten Frances' roast lamb with mustard, rosemary, thyme, anchovies, lemon zest and garlic on top.

Frances: He might get pudding tonight for saying that! But Geordie does the best lamb chops on the barbecue. And he'll butcher them himself too.

Al: Ok, who would you invite over for this legendary lamb feast?

Geordie: Richie McCaw. I actually played against him at university. My team won so I'm sure he'd love to relive that game together...

Frances: Our neighbours Justine and Reuben Hopcroft. Although it could be a long night!

Geordie: Frances' grandfather Frank Forrester, I never got to meet him but he was a top North Canterbury farmer in his time with a climate completely different to ours.



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