



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.

Together with a team of 45, fifth-generation vegetable grower Robin Oakley and wife Shirleen grow potatoes, broccoli, pumpkin and beetroot on 450ha based in Southbridge, Canterbury.

They're standing here with Robin's father Graeme, who still lives on the original Oakley family farm of over 100 years near the Waimakariri River in Halkett. Also pictured is their daughter April. She's just started in the business, so Robin and Shirleen's fingers are well crossed that she'll become the sixth generation Oakley on the land. Clearly, growing is in the blood!

From an early age Robin grew his own vegetables in the backyard, and by fifth form (Year 11), couldn't think of a good reason to stay at school.

A lot has changed since those days, including varieties grown, increased technology and environmental awareness. What hasn't, clearly, is a deeply entrenched love for the growing process and the positivity it creates for staff, community and consumers, recognised deservedly with three Ballance Farm Environment Awards. Al Brown chats with Robin and Shirleen and finds out more.

Al: I've bought your amazing potatoes from the supermarket. Have you always had your own brand?

Robin: Good man! Pretty early on we made the decision to create a consumer-driven business rather than a growing-led business because we thought that was the only way we were going to grow. Creating our own brand under the Oakley's label has been incredible – we enjoy talking to people about what they and their families are eating and finding out what our customers want.

Al: We're seeing a lot of change in our restaurants. More informal eating, different diets. Are people's potato eating habits changing too?

Shirleen: People are buying less at a time. And there are so many other foods and cuisines available these days, so to keep up, we need to change and evolve too. We constantly trial about 11 varieties, with cooking and tasting tests conducted over two or three seasons. Currently we are looking at smaller potatoes, greater size consistency, thinner skins, and faster cooking potatoes.

Al: And what led you to enter the Ballance Farm Environment Awards?

Robin: We've always thought Kiwis should know the provenance stories behind the fabulous fruit and veg they see and buy at the grocers and supermarket – especially those who have negative views of the agricultural industry as a whole! The awards are a great platform for telling these stories to the public, and to attract new recruits into the industry, which is so vital.

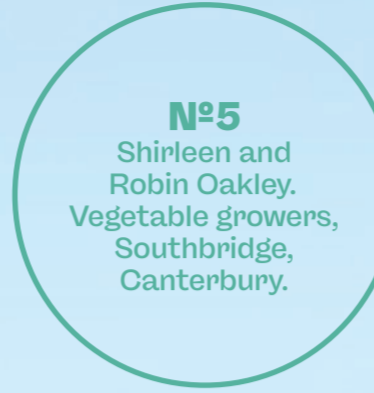
Al: Did your awards' success have any effect on your business?

Shirleen: Above all, a hugely positive effect on our staff. After we shared the awards presentation it made us realise that because everyone is so busy, not everyone knew how all their jobs linked up in the production chain. It was hugely inspiring to see our people go home feeling so proud.

Robin: We also lease a lot of land off other farmers and it was important to us to show them that we care about their land too.

Al: It's great that the environment is now front of mind for all of us in how we operate, isn't it?

Robin: Absolutely. A healthy environment is the most important ingredient to growing a good crop, so it's certainly something we are constantly looking to improve. We crop rotate to mitigate the build-up of pathogens and pests that occur,



WITH *Al Brown*

improving and protecting soil structure and fertility. We also test the nitrogen levels in our soil before planting and only add the exact amount of fertiliser required.

Al: So technology plays a big part in your operation too?

Shirleen: Feel and intuition will always be important to Robin, but technology helps to create consistency and quality, and reduce our footprint.

Robin: We can still tell by the leaf what's happening under the ground, and still manually fork the soil, but we've introduced probes that tell us the moisture level of the soil, so that we can apply the exact amount of water needed.

Al: Looking ahead, what's your main focus?

Robin: There is still huge potential for increasing our domestic consumption of potatoes. This includes education, and reminding people that potatoes are a raw vegetable, unrefined and packed full of Mother Nature's goodness, rather than the high carb, high GI food they are sometimes thought of.

Al: Ok, here's a hard one - mashed, roasted, fried, baked, or boiled?

Robin: Ha, that's easy! Our Golden Gourmets straight out of the ground, washed, boiled with some salt and no butter.

Shirleen: Trust us, you'll always go back for seconds!

Al: Or thirds! Who would you love to have over to share them?

Shirleen: Family first, so I'd start with our two girls. We really miss our other daughter who is studying in Sydney.

Robin: We also love adventures so it would be amazing to have two legendary Sirs – Peter Blake and Ed Hillary. I enjoy cycling to stay fit, so definitely Lance Armstrong for the stories. If he'd had our Golden Gourmets he wouldn't have needed all that other stuff to get him up those hills. Spuds not drugs!



TRY MY SMASHED GRIDDLE OAKLEY'S POTATOES WITH BLACK OLIVE MAYO AND FRESH HERBS.



FIND THE RECIPE AT NZFEATRUST.ORG.NZ



The Ballance Farm Environment Awards is a pan-sector programme that promotes best practice, sustainable farming and growing. To join the journey or find out more, visit nzfeatrust.org.nz