

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 Hawke's Bay farmers Linda and Evan Potter, and you wouldn't pick they're the New Zealand Farm Environment Trust's current National Ambassadors for Sustainable Farming and Growing and the recipients of the Gordon Stephenson Trophy.

And that's just the way they like it.

Incredibly humble but fiercely proud, they see their success as less about them and more as a way to help, encourage and share what they've learned with the whole farming community.

This attitude was instilled in both of them by their respective farming families growing up - Linda in Tolaga Bay and Evan in Southern Hawke's Bay.

Both were taught the importance of looking after land, animals and the community, which remained top of mind when they purchased Waipapa in 1997.

"It was a blank canvas - you'd call it a do-up if it was in the city," laughs Linda, "but we had a clear plan from the start and now we wouldn't live anywhere else," she adds.

"Both parents were great teachers of common sense," says Evan. That mindset transfers well in farming, for example looking at the right land use for the right land type. Why fight nature? Some land is better suited to bush, some to livestock, some is better as wetlands and some retired."

"As the current kaitiaki of this land it is our responsibility to care and enhance it," adds Linda.

Today this aesthetically beautiful farm is a diverse, profitable business and a thriving example of biodiversity. One purposefully designed to weather the inconsistencies of a tough landscape, climate change, Covid 19 and other factors that can affect the bottom line - without compromising their commitment to a sustainable approach to their land.

Al Brown sits with them both and finds out more.

Al: Tell me about your personal farming philosophy.

Evan: Our parents always said; give it a crack but have a plan. So we have four pillars we always go back to: financial, people, animals and environment. It encourages a holistic approach to every decision.

Linda: The first one is the most important. Having a sound financial base allows choices to be made. But it's not just about production, production, production. It's about focusing time and energy into what will make things better.

Al: And what things have you made better here?

Evan: Early on we retired almost a quarter of the farm, mainly into QEII National Trust covenants. We also have an annual pole planting programme in place for shade and erosion control, and a native planting programme which includes riparian and wetland areas.

Linda: And after a fair few years of pest control, the kowhai are flourishing and the birds have followed.

Al: And what kind of involvement do you have in the community?

Linda: Having four daughters, we've been heavily involved in a variety of organisations in the community. It's great fun and we've always thought we are stronger collectively.

Evan: Whether it's sport, dog trialling - Linda's dad still works on the farm and trains his dogs - or duck shooting, we have a great circle of friends and whānau to share problems, ideas and good times with. We're very lucky.

Al: Congratulations on your BFEA win. What made you enter?

Evan: We had a crack eight years ago and it was an amazing learning experience. This time we saw an opportunity to showcase our story to the wider community and illustrate that ordinary farmers care deeply about their land and animals.

Linda: We decided that we didn't want to just be bystanders in our industry and hoped our story could inspire others on their journey.

Al: You guys are both pretty humble. What's changed since winning?

Linda: Doing all the press and speeches is definitely outside our comfort zone! But we really felt a need to share the positive work going on in the industry, so made a conscious decision to enter and have learnt to be more vocal in sharing our knowledge.

Evan: From the calibre of the other contestants to the judges, the whole awards' process was inspirational. We were given ideas we hadn't thought of before; even

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Evan and Linda Potter. Deer, sheep and beef farmers, Waipapa, Elsthorpe, Hawkes Bay.

WITH

Al Brown

subtle suggestions like pruning trees higher for better shade for the animals. Everyone's desire to share useful information was incredible. And now we want to pass that on.

Al: Spreading the goodness from farm to farm. I love it. So how is NZ's agricultural future looking?

Linda: We're very conscious of the world outside the farm gate. So we have close relationships with our suppliers and have had Marks & Spencer and others on the farm. It's a great reminder that meeting consumer demand for authenticity, sustainability and taste is vital.

Evan: To us, the global desire for protein that is sustainably produced, while enhancing and protecting the environment, biodiversity and communities, is only getting stronger. It's still going to be about protecting soil and stock, and always striving to do better.

Al: There's a fair bit of tasty food coming off this land. What's your favourite?

Linda: A Moroccan spice rubbed venison backstrap cooked on the BBQ with a blackberry sauce, crushed new potatoes with thyme, green beans with lemon and a green salad all fresh from the garden and paddock.

Evan: We always serve it to visitors and never tell them what they're eating until afterwards. They usually can't believe it's venison!

Al: One of my favourite meats too! So, who would you have over to share it?

Evan: Apart from family and friends overseas, it would have to be our close group of neighbours (who should remain anonymous - but...).

There's the wine expert (Sandy), the non-confirmist (Greg), the cheeky one (Rach), the one without a filter (James), the Aussie (Alison), the salt-of-the-earth one (Harry), the debater (Bid), and the self-proclaimed 'good citizen' (Bob).

Linda: We love them all. They're always there when you need them, and it would definitely be an interesting evening. Mind you, they would probably have to stay the night...



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