

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.

For Masterton farmers Shirley and Jeff Ravenwood, looking out over Fernglen, the beautiful place they've called home for 25 years, still fills them with wonder. With over 750ha of flat land, hills, native bush and forest extending to the coast – as well as another 400 odd hectares down the road, there's plenty of diversity on show.

But while some might see this as a challenge, the Ravenwoods have only ever seen opportunity.

"To own a piece of land is a gift, says Shirley. "We feel very lucky to have such diverse terrain making it suitable for many different animal species – wild and farmed – to thrive.

"We can hunt inland then catch a crayfish on the same day – it doesn't get any better than that!"

Not that they have much time for fishing and hunting. While most farmers at the same stage of life might be winding down, the Ravenwoods have added yet more chapters to their lives – ones that aim to bring them closer to their children, and set up a viable path for their future.

While sheep and beef farming has always provided most of the income, the Ravenwoods have recently become involved in producing Mānuka honey from their fenced-off native bush, and cashmere fibre from goats.

However, the big news is the range of award-winning, prebiotic sheep milk products they've developed under the Fernglen Farm label, in partnership with their children; Cameron, Ben and Baeley.

"We milk onsite, transport it to Masterton, process it in partnership with a local artisan cheese factory, and even put the labels on ourselves," says Jeff.

"It's a living project that brings the whole family together, despite the kids studying away from home. It's a great way to keep them involved in the farm," adds Shirley.

Al Brown sat down for a chat with the couple to find out more.

Al: So, you two, what happened to retirement?

Jeff: Haha! Well, in 2015, I read an article on sheep milk and showed it to the family. We learned that it's high in key nutrients, has nearly twice the protein and calcium of cow's milk, and contains only A2 type proteins which are seen to be more easily digested than A1 type proteins.

Shirley: These nutritional benefits have seen a huge global increase in the demand for sheep milk products and, importantly to us, it has a relatively low environmental footprint, which really fits with our motto: Better for you, better for earth. It's a great story to tell and a product we genuinely believe in.

Al: And how's the reaction been, both in the industry and from consumers in general?

Shirley: We're getting good traction in some key outlets around the country, but when we started our friends probably thought we'd lost our marbles! However, the support from the community has been great. We've created jobs, and there's curiosity from everywhere about what we're doing. The farm welcomes visitors and we love connecting people to the source of their food.

Jeff: Other farmers are seeing that diversifying can be good. Plus, with sheep milking we see problems early, so are feeding this information and learnings back to traditional farmers in local discussion groups.

Al: How has diversifying what you produce affected how you look after the land?

Shirley: The land will be here long after us and it's our responsibility to leave it in a better state than we found it in. Like many farmers, we're always looking for ways to get the most off the land and our animals without imposing ourselves on it, or them. Mānuka honey naturally thrives in our fenced off native bush, while dairy sheep love our flat land, for example.

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Shirley and Jeff Ravenwood with children Cameron, Ben and Baeley. Sheep and beef/cashmere goat farmers, sheep milkers. Fernglen, Masterton.

WITH

Al Brown

Jeff: We're planting up to 200 Poplar and Willows annually to make sure paddocks have shade and shelter for our animals. We've also been fencing off our wetlands and native bush. The benefit has seen all the nutrients returned to the pastures rather than being scattered round the bush.

Al: This approach was something the Ballance Farm Environment Awards judges noticed too, I take it?

Shirley: Yes, we entered about 10 years ago and again last year, and were thrilled to pick up three regional awards. It's so important to enter and be part of the bigger story demonstrating to the wider world that farmers enjoy looking after their livestock and the environment, and we're good at it!

Jeff: The judges feedback was hugely encouraging. We've leased part of a local cheesemaker's plant, and the Awards gave us the confidence to push towards getting the factory upgraded to export standards and working with partners to create strong local and export markets for our sheep milk.

Al: So with this eye to the future, what do you see as yours and the wider industry's focus over the next few years?

Jeff: As a country our competitive advantage will continue to be around being efficient producers of quality food with a low environmental footprint. We can do

this by creating lasting partnerships and sharing knowledge and resources. That will encourage new and exciting products. It's amazing how much help is out there – it's about being brave enough to ask for it.

Shirley: Diversification of products will lead to diversification of skills required, which will help attract and retain new people to careers in agriculture. For instance, we see huge potential in attracting sharemilkers to the sheep milking industry.

Al: Love that thinking. Your milk has a lovely creamy, slightly sweet taste. What dishes do you like to use it in?

Shirley: Pancakes with our vanilla flavoured milk, served with berry coulis and whipped cream taken straight from the top of the bottle!

Jeff: You can't go past creamy scrambled eggs made with our whole milk. It's a pretty good way to start the day.

Al: Sounds like the perfect brekkie all round. Who would you invite to share it?

Shirley: I'd love chef Nadia Lim to pop over and talk about food.

Jeff: John Key to talk business, and Richie McCaw to talk footy.

Shirley: I wouldn't mind inviting a few of those younger All Blacks round too!



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