

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.

Ask Dannevirke dairy farmers Andrew Hardie and Helen Long for a piece of advice to pass onto young farmers and their answer is simple but compelling – “be good ancestors”. This pledge to do right today, to benefit others tomorrow, is a philosophy that has been instilled in them by their own parents, and is one they are determined to pass onto their three adult children Katelyn, Callum, and Jordan.

It is also at the heart of how they run their 428ha dairy farm, Te Maunga.

Flanked by the Manawatu and Mangatewainui rivers, 720 Friesian-Jersey-crosses are milked once a day here and delicious dairy-Wagyu-cross beef is bred and sold under the First Light brand.

Andrew and Helen have created a model of sustainability and profitability, taking out the Regional Supreme Ballance Farm Environment Award in 2018.

“The opportunity to get environmentally-focussed judges looking closely at our enterprise and providing constructive feedback was priceless,” says Andrew of the experience.

“We loved the process and were honoured to be given the opportunity to become judges ourselves,” says Helen, adding, “it was incredibly encouraging to see so much positivity industry-wide.”

Enjoying work/life balance, a thriving business, and decreased environmental footprint, it's no wonder Helen calls Te Maunga their little patch of paradise.

Al: You guys bought Te Maunga in 1999 – was it as beautiful then as it is now?

Helen: It's always been beautiful, but the land was pretty marginal when we bought it. It was all we could afford, so we had to make it work. But from day one, we looked at making long-term improvements to conserve the farm for our family.

Andrew: We border two rivers, so we quickly realised fencing stock out of these waterways was vital. The rivers now provide drinking water for the family, as well as stunning swimming, fishing and jetboating spots – you'll have to join us some time!

Al: I'll bring my rod! I love your long-term view – how important is it to have that vision do you think?

Helen: For us, sustainability equals longevity and balance across the environment, business and our people, so we look at all three areas to help the operation thrive.

Andrew: That means regenerating native bush areas, developing wetlands around the farm, retiring areas with permanent fencing, and planting pines as well as over 1000 other riparian plants every year.

Al: I can see from your story a real emphasis on sharing, which I just love because it's something I really value in our industry – sharing inspiration and finding inspiration from other restaurants.

Andrew: Sharing is so important. This can be a tough business but we're lucky to have a brilliant team around us and we all support each other – from our sharemilkers, great local suppliers, supportive family, a tight community and of course, each other. Good, genuine partnerships.

Helen: At the end of the day, we're all in this together so we have to be open to sharing ideas, linking arms and climbing the hill together. It's a journey, and you get to what you think is the end, to find you're only about halfway there! There's still lots of trial and error – and like you, we've all got to keep trying new things, exploring new ideas, and learning from others.

Al: More and more, we're seeing our customers placing huge importance on knowing where their food comes from. What role can you play in this conversation?

Nº3
Andrew Hardie and
Helen Long,
Dairy farmers,
Te Maunga Farm,
Dannevirke

WITH

Al Brown

Helen: As a society, I feel like there is a real pull to move back to a more natural way of life. The kids are proud to bring their friends here from all over the world and eat food off the land. It's a really eye-opening experience for those people.

Al: And these are the stories that will help us continue to compete on the global stage in the future, right?

Andrew: Absolutely. Producing the most delicious, highest quality, healthy and environmentally sound foods in the world should continue to be our focus. As a country we are selling premium quality food so we have to reflect that in everything we do.

Al: Ok, here's a meaty question. What's your favourite food off the farm?

Helen: Ha! All of it! From the venison out the back, to the Wagyu. But I also love a bit of lamb, so we'll often trade beef for lamb with our neighbour!

Al: And of course, good food is best enjoyed with company, so who would you invite over to share a meal with you?

Andrew: Helen's mum and dad are sadly not with us any longer, and my dad passed away when I was 17. He never got to meet Helen or our children, so it would be pretty special to have all our parents and children round the same table for one night.

Al: Three generations of good ancestors all together – sounds perfect . . .



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AND BURNT BUTTER MASH.



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