

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.

Everyone has a lightbulb moment in their lives. For Catriona White of Coastal Kiwis Orchard in Opotiki, it happened in a cramped Auckland house where she was living with husband Mark, and preschool aged children Letisha and Lochlan. "I had the sudden realisation that I wanted my kids to be able to ride around the house," says Catriona. What this really meant was a desire to return to the land.

Both come from farming backgrounds on the East Coast. Catriona's dairy farming parents were kiwifruit pioneers in the late 70s while Mark grew up 30 minutes inland on a sheep and beef farm. A list of business and lifestyle non-negotiables was drafted up and a search across all agricultural sectors began. One that returned them right back to where they grew up.

"Catriona's parents offered us the opportunity to purchase some of their property and established the orchard from land we used to pick up hay bales on during our summer holidays," says Mark.

14 years later, the Whites enjoy a successful certified (BioGro) organic business exporting organic kiwifruit varieties to over 15 countries through Zespri.

A business and lifestyle that has seen them recognised as the first horticulturalists to win the Ballance Farm Environment Trust's National Award and the Gordon Stephenson Trophy. And the icing on the cake? Children who have grown up not only being able to ride around the house – but now even have their own mini orchard block to manage between studies.

Al Brown finds out more from Catriona and Mark.

Al: It must have been pretty daunting starting a whole new career, despite your farming backgrounds?

Mark: I'd come from being Operations Manager for NZ Post in Auckland, while Catriona was a busy mum to two children under five. So we definitely made a few mistakes!

Catriona: But we always had a clear vision to grow organically, so that provided a focus. The challenge of understanding Mother Nature to help us produce a commercial crop was nerve racking at the start. But she knows a thing or two.

Al: So was growing organically a business or philosophical decision?

Catriona: Both. The orchard was the kids' playground so we wanted it to be a safe place to be in. From a business perspective our goal was and is to sustainably grow the best quality organic kiwifruit, and to benchmark ourselves to not only the organic category, but the industry as a whole.

Mark: When we first started visitors would say: "Oh that looks quite nice for organic." We wanted the outcome to be that tasty, quality organic food can be grown commercially. Luckily it's changing. People's desire for the kind of fresh, natural whole foods their grandparents ate is only increasing.

Al: Caring for the land is obviously important to you?

Catriona: It's been in my family for five generations – our children are the sixth. We swim, play, and eat from our local waterways and coastline which serves to constantly remind us of the special place where we live.

Mark: Everything needs a habitat and we aim to keep our orchard environment in a state of natural balance. We want to work in harmony with Mother Nature and increase the biodiversity on the farm to keep producing healthy food from healthy soil and clean water-ways for generations.

Al: And how are you keeping that balance?

Catriona: Our soil is our biggest asset, so we spend more time looking down, rather than looking at our crop. A small flock of certified organic sheep carry out weed control duties around the sides of the orchard, helping reduce soil compaction from tractors, especially in winter.

Mark: Our 'unpaid pest experts' work pretty hard in the orchard, including native weka and fantail, who prey on insects. Slugs living beneath the vines in slug hotels' assist in recycling organic material on the orchard floor. They also provide a source of food for birds to distract them chewing on the newly grafted vines.

Nº9
Catriona and Mark White. Organic kiwifruit growers, Coastal Kiwis Organic Orchard (17ha), Opotiki, Bay of Plenty.

WITH

Al Brown

Al: You've had amazing success in the Ballance Farm Environment Awards. Why did you enter?

Catriona: We were approached by Zespri. Mark's first reaction was that we weren't ready but you never really are. We have a rolling five year strategy plan so everything is work in progress. Plus it's easy to get siloed into what you are doing, so it's good to get another perspective.

Al: Tell us about your BFEA experience.

Mark: It was great to have 'outside' eyes look at our business and give such a detailed review of our operation. Plus we won an international study tour trip to Italy! The children came and we visited numerous orchards, markets and packing facilities.

Catriona: From dairy to sheep and beef farmers, forestry workers, and even to bee-keepers, we've had the opportunity to learn and understand common issues from different perspectives.

Al: How does what you do in your farming business affect your wider community?

Catriona: For us, sustainability extends from our products to our land, people and communities. From our accountants to our pickers, family and community – everyone plays a part. Just like every animal and insect on the farm!

Al: Ok so what's your favourite kiwifruit variety?

Catriona: All of them! The Tricolour of SunGold, Green & Red Organic kiwifruit taste delicious together, especially in a kiwifruit sorbet.

Mark: Can't beat organic SunGolds with herbs in a boned-out shoulder of pork, on the BBQ, served with a spicy organic kiwifruit chutney.

Al: Yum! And finally, if you could invite three people to dinner, who would they be?

Catriona: We both love David Attenborough. And Nadia Lim. Her motto – food from the ground, sea and sky and less from the factories – totally resonates. We have a huge veggie garden and haven't bought any in months, so I think she'd love that.

Mark: Steven Adams. He's funny, awesome and still a good kiwi boy at heart. But we'd probably have to cook a bit more to feed him!



TRY MY DELICIOUS TART WITH COCONUT CUSTARD AND GOLDEN KIWIFRUIT.



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