

# THE TRUTH OF ORGANIC FARMING MILK PROCESSING AND MARKETING AS I SEE IT

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Why would we change from a profitable, low input, easy to operate system to one where we have had to do all our learning all over again? This has one very simple answer for us as we have had many family and friends affected by cancer which, to some extent, is a reflection of the food chain and all the chemicals etc that are now part of it. So we changed to organic farming for that simple reason.

In the early years of changing to organic farming the monetary costs can be greater especially if you let every salesman that comes up your drive sell you his magic potion. To us, getting all the balances right in the soil is the first priority. This can take time and plenty of money, depending on what is lacking.

One change in thinking has to be that you need a feed buffer, as nitrogen isn't a possibility and buying in feed depends on what organic feed is available out there.

Animal health needs a little bit more thought and homework, but the best is being proactive. Deal with things before they become an issue. We don't drench for worms, so the best way of grazing our calves is back to the method we used 30 years ago, spreading them around the farm at 2 per paddock. Feeding hay to springers helps prevent milk fever. Overall the biggest help is not letting animals get stressed at all, as this prevents many problems.

The one issue that is by far the hardest to deal with is mastitis. This we tackle on many fronts:

- breeding - we select bull on SCC
- ensure milking plant is always working 100%
- cider vinegar
- homeopathic remedies
- insure the affected ¼'s are milked out thoroughly and even milking the 3 times a day.
- antibiotics and shifted to nonorganic farm
- cull

Once you have the soil in balance and have learnt to deal with the animal health issues, organic farming can be very rewarding and even financially rewarding. In our situation of now having the farm in total staff control because of my involvement in the processing and marketing of our products, we do have to have very good staff that are passionate about what we are trying to do.

## **Milk processing and marketing**

This has all come about from my desire when we first purchased our first farm at Tukurau to one day process our own milk. Approximately 5 years ago we decided that we should make it become a

reality. So this started with a two day cheese making course. Then eighteen months of one day a week in Lois's kitchen trying to perfect the recipes that I had learnt about from books and hours on the internet.

Our research involved looking at many factories and talking to the operators, both in NZ and Australia. Also talking to plant suppliers, all of whom were very keen to get their hands on our money. We decided on a company in Palmerston North to supply all the plant and assist with the design of the factory.

The cheese part of the factory was operational from October 2008 and the yoghurt plant finally started operating in February 2010. Dealing with some of the bureaucrats to get to the operating stage showed how extremely costly and impractical some of the people who administer the law have become. I can definitely understand why people go to other countries to set up businesses. New Zealand does not encourage small business development but rather has a negative attitude towards it from the administration of our laws. It was quite amusing though to see the reaction when I mentioned that I would write to Rodney Hide about the issues that were happening. All of a sudden I could do what I needed to do.

That aside, we now operate our factory producing 11 different cheeses, one of which Catlins Camembert won a bronze medal at the Cuisine Cheese Awards this year. We think not a bad achievement for a dairy farmer in his first year making cheese. We now also produce a range of yoghurts - natural, raspberry, citrus and apricot. All of our products are sold under our Retro Organics brand. The factory now employs 2 people plus myself.

I also do the marketing but we have recently employed a person to market in Auckland. We now have over 100 retailers stocking our products with this growing at a steady rate.

The consumer is very supportive of a small NZ business and also our story of grass to plate relates well to many consumers.

We are never going to satisfy to needs of all consumers, but there is a group out there that want our type of products with our type of story attached to it, and can afford to pay for it.

We cannot compete with big automated factories so we have to have other points that the consumer want.

As I enjoy marketing it hasn't been too difficult a task to market our products, but it is one area where we have to have continuous input to keep growing at the rate that we want to.

Had I known how much I would have had to do with such non-productive waste of space bureaucrats I would not have taken on this project, but now we are where we are at (and I have found the bureaucrats to deal with who can be helpful), it is extremely rewarding to be able to take our finished product to the consumer and see them enjoy it. The satisfaction is great and has made all the pain worthwhile.