

THE RAS ALTERNATIVE FARMING PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS



L'Lubatog Nominees Pty Ltd – Apostle Whey Cheese



When milk prices slumped a few years ago, Julian and Dianne Benson were quick to take advantage of their farm's second-greatest asset after the cows: its location. The 147 hectare farm, at Cooriemungle, near Simpson in southwest Victoria, is close to the Twelve Apostles, one of the state's premier tourist attractions.

With hundreds of visitors passing their door each week, and many tourists already dropping in to see a working dairy farm, the Bensons decided that the best way to boost their income was to start making their own cheeses. They enrolled in a cheese-making course at Gilbert Chandler College at Werribee and, two years later, in September 2005, opened Apostle Whey cheese factory.

Today, with a couple of competition gold medals under their belt, the Bensons sell their cheeses from the farm gate and also supply gourmet food shops, wineries and restaurants.

They produce several varieties, all with colourful names. The varieties include Loch Ard Gorgeous camembert, Apostle Crumble fetta, Misty Moonlight Head blue vein, The Grotto havarti and Southern Briez brie.

The couple admit they have come a long way since moving to the-then 73 hectare farm in 1981. The farm now covers 147 hectare and milks 250 Friesian cows. About 80,000 litres, from a production of 1.6 million litres of milk, is used for cheese production.

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Nature's Haven



Riverina vegetable growers Don and Elaine Murray have no trouble getting labour. They have literally millions of workers ready to toil day and night for no pay and just their keep. Their workers are ladybirds, and they are largely responsible for the quality of produce the Murrays deliver by simply eating the bad bugs away.

The Murrays began their organic vegetable business, Nature's Haven, in 2002 on a 33 hectare block that is now certified organic. The Murrays have grown several crops, including varieties of pumpkins, watermelons, rockmelons, squash, shallots, garlic, rosemary, cherry tomatoes and herbs.

Most weeks they consign two lots of vegetables to each of the Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne markets. They have also sold 22 tonnes of pumpkins to Heinz for baby food. It's deals such as this Don hopes to secure more of in the future.

The Murray's decision to go organic was both philosophical and economic. "Sure, it was a philosophical decision and it requires a whole different mindset," Don said. "You have to be able to plan ahead, and organic production requires ongoing management rather than a quick-fix attitude."

But it is no secret that he and Elaine were also attracted by the prospect of higher returns. "Organics sell for anything from zero to 100 per cent above the wholesale price for conventionally produced vegetables," Don said. While two-thirds of the area is irrigated and farmed, a third has been set aside for native vegetation. The native vegetation also acts as a harbour for the predators that eat many of the insects that attack their vegetables. "Our cropping management practices are all about working in harmony with nature and natural processes," Elaine said.

Hastings Ostrich Services Pty Ltd

Michael Hastings knows all about the highs and lows of breeding ostriches, having ridden the industry rollercoaster. He and his wife, Victoria, own and run Hastings Ostrich Farms, at Winchelsea, and are involved in every aspect of ostrich production, from breeding birds to selling the finished products.

Just about every part of an ostrich has a market, from meat for eating, hide for leather goods, feathers for the fashion industry and eggs for the craft industry. The Hastings family ventured into ostrich breeding when Michael was at university studying agriculture, as an alternative to beef cattle. "We started with eight chicks and now we hatch between 7000-9000 birds a year," Michael said.

"We have a specialised breeder farm, a specialised hatchery and grower farm, and then we sell a lot of day-old chicks to other companies, who then get them contract-reared." The Hastings grow out 1500 birds to 30kg on about 2 hectares, then rotate the land used. The birds graze pastures and eat silage, hay and grain.

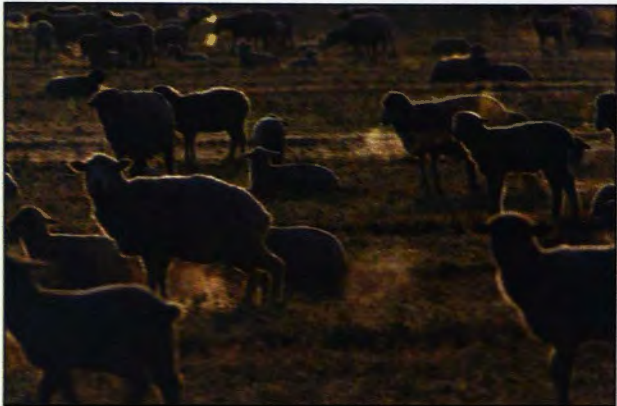
Mature weights of ostriches vary according to the breed. The African Blacks and Australian Greys might be 120-130kg, while the Kenyan Reds and Zimbabwean Blues can reach 150-180kg. "They've all got different traits, so we're trying to maximise the better traits in our breeding program," Michael said.

The birds are processed at Myrtleford Game Meats Company and 95 per cent of the meat is exported to Asia, the US and Europe. Michael has the skins processed at a Wangaratta tannery. The pair also run a shop, The Vault, in the former Winchelsea National Bank of Australia building. Here they sell leather products, including bags, wallets and belts, along with feather bags and dusters. Any infertile eggs are blown and sold for crafts.





RURAL FINANCE



Nalda Park Pastoral Company

Nathan and Penny Craig are a young couple any farming community would love to clone. They are not only committed to their fledgling farming enterprise but also to building the rural community.

The couple operate a sheep and cropping enterprise near Apsley, in the Wimmera. As well as building their farm, adding leased land and building a contracting business and Limousin stud, they are heavily involved in farming groups.



They are members of the South East Prime Lamb Young Achievers, Agri-Links and the Victorian No-Till Farmers Association. Penny also works for Solly Business Services at Naracoorte and is studying for her masters degree in Agricultural Science.

To the Craigs, being involved in such groups is part of running a successful business. "The groups give us a social opportunity in an industry where you tend to not come into contact with a lot of people," Penny said. "It gives us the chance to talk about things, good and bad, that will make our businesses and lives better."

The Craigs work in partnership with Nathan's parents, Bill and Debbie. Their home block, Nalda Park, is 500 hectares and they also lease 900 hectares and manage another 80 hectares.

They run 5500 sheep, including 3000 Merino ewes, of which 1800 are mated to Merinos for a self-replacing flock and 1200 to terminal sires for prime lambs. The family aims to balance the cropping and sheep enterprises equally in terms of time, although a larger area was cropped last year. They also hope to rebuild their ewe numbers to 4000 in the next five years, with half to be mated to Merinos and half to terminal sires.

THE RURAL FINANCE SHEEP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

Helen Raven

A visit to Helen Raven's farm in southern NSW is a rare treat. Helen, her husband, Rob Sturgess, and daughter, Jess, aim to run the largest commercial flock of Hampshire Downs in Australia on their farm at Henty.

She plans to increase the size of her flock from 110 stud ewes to 300 within the next few years. Helen says heritage sheep can be both attractive and commercially viable. She stumbled across the breed in 2000 while searching for a suitable ram to join to her first-cross ewes. At the time Helen and Rob were living at Coleambally on a 20 hectare irrigation block where they grew lucerne, oats, pumpkins and watermelons and raised cattle, heritage pigs and poultry.



After finding the Hampshire Downs in a book on heritage breeds, Helen bought a purebred ram from a Nagambie breeder to join their first-cross ewes. "I was so impressed with the lambs we decided to buy six purebred ewes. I had the bug well and truly by then," Helen said.

Helen and Rob registered their Jurumbula stud in 2002, but the need for more land prompted a move to the 129 hectare dryland farm at Henty in 2006. Before the move, she sold her Tamworth and Large Black pigs to other breeders, which has enabled her to concentrate on building sheep and cattle numbers.

She conceded she knew little about sheep until taking on the Hampshire Downs breed. "Last year I bought 47 ewes and 40 ewe weaners to build up numbers. With a limited genetic pool, the stud sheep are just so hard to get," Helen said. "I have kept my best 60 ewes for the stud and the rest are run as commercial sheep." Helen sells direct to consumers at the Canberra farmers' market, and plans to introduce a branded boned-out product.

Millring Pastoral

There was never any pressure for Tim Paulet to come home to work on the family farm. He just wanted to. It also provided a succession plan for Tim and his brother, Rowan, to eventually take over the family farm at Toongabbie in Gippsland.

Importantly, the move brought renewed passion and a thirst to apply new technology and ideas. "While Dad holds the reins, they are fairly loose and we get a say in what management decisions are made," Tim said. That they are open to new challenges and direction is a key component to their on-farm success.



While production levels have increased on the 1215ha property over the years, the measure of the Paulets' profit is strictly dollars per hectare. Wool has always been their main enterprise but this now comprises just 25 per cent of the operation, with crops muscling in with 30 per cent, lambs 20 per cent and cattle 25 per cent. They run 6500 superfine Merinos, 350 first-cross ewes, and 150 first-cross ewe lambs on the home property, plus another 450 older Merinos and 1500 first-cross ewes on leased country.

The Paulets' aim is to produce good-quality, sound wool in the 17-19 micron range. "We produce 43 kilograms a hectare of wool now and we want to increase that," Tim said. "Our target is 55 kilograms a hectare."

The family has a spring-lambing enterprise and shears three times a year. The main shearing is in February for all adult sheep. Weaner lambs have their first shearing in June, at 10 months, and their second in April. They then join the main flock in February. Sheep are run on stubble from crops, which helps rest pastures and, as the stubble is clean, it doubles as a worm-resistance management tool. They also clean up any grain.

THE DPI YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS



Department of Primary Industries

Adrian Conti

J & D Conti Pty Ltd

Adrian Conti's business - J & D Conti Pty Ltd - is also a finalist in the Bayer CropScience Horticulture Producer of the Year. Please refer to this section for notes on this finalist.

Gaethan Cutri

Cutri Fruit

Gaethan Cutri's business - Cutri Fruit - is also a finalist in the Bayer CropScience Horticulture Producer of the Year. Please refer to this section for notes on this finalist.

Nathan Craig

Nalda Park Pastoral Company

Nathan Craig's business - Nalda Park Pastoral Company - is also a finalist in both the Rural Finance Sheep Producer of the Year and the CASE IH Crop Producer of the Year. Please refer to these sections for notes on this finalist.

NOTES

THE 2008 FARM BUSINESS OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 FARM BUSINESS OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 MOUNTAIN FARM PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 MOUNTAIN FARM PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 CROP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 CROP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 DAIRY PRODUCER OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 DAIRY PRODUCER OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 ALTERNATIVE FARMING PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 ALTERNATIVE FARMING PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith
THE 2008 PORK PRODUCER OF THE YEAR	THE 2008 PORK PRODUCER OF THE YEAR
John & Mary Smith	John & Mary Smith

2006 AWARD WINNERS

THE 2006 FARM BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Glenspean Partners
Meredith, Victoria

THE 2006 YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR

Matthew Tonissen
Hamilton, Victoria

THE 2006 HORTICULTURE PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Malakoff Estate Vineyards
Landsborough, Victoria

THE 2006 CROP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

E, J & D Stephens
Shelford, Victoria

THE 2006 DAIRY PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

GW & SM Croft
Mepunga West, Victoria

THE 2006 BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Warrawillah Pty Ltd
Bruthen, Victoria

THE 2006 ALTERNATIVE FARMING PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Glenspean Partners
Meredith, Victoria

THE 2006 SHEEP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

MJ, TK & JA Tonissen
Hamilton, Victoria

2005 AWARD WINNERS

THE 2005 FARM BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Green Eggs Pty Ltd
Ararat, Victoria

THE 2005 YOUNG FARMER OF THE YEAR

Ross & Kaye Heywood
Congupna, Victoria

THE 2005 HORTICULTURE PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Minter Magic Pty Ltd
Redcliffs, Victoria

THE 2005 CROP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Tooma Station
Tooma, New South Wales

THE 2005 DAIRY PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

GT & JW Fleming
Finley, New South Wales

THE 2005 BEEF PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Jim Seager
Mt Wallace, Victoria

THE 2005 ALTERNATIVE FARMING PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Green Eggs Pty Ltd
Ararat, Victoria

THE 2005 SHEEP PRODUCER OF THE YEAR

Cashmore Park
Cashmore, Victoria

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RURAL FINANCE



SHOWING VICTORIA