

Organic beef

Jervoise hits on ideal business model

By DOMINIC O'BRIEN

Jervoise Organics began implementing organic livestock systems way back in 1979. It observed then that despite dipping and spraying, ticks and flies were still a problem. It did not see the point in continuing with something that did not work.

The company began to look for more natural ways to raise livestock and continued in this direction before finally becoming certified with the BFA in 1996.

The business has developed to the point where it recently opened its own meat processing plant, enabling it to oversee the entire production process from start to finish. The abattoir is expected to be certified this year.

MEATWORKS VALUE-ADDS

Jervoise has taken value-adding to the next level by buying a meat processing plant, enabling it to maximise profits. It is also involved to a large extent in retailing its meat by selling direct to the public.

The meatworks was bought in December 2004 as a fully functioning and working facility in excellent working order, and is located on 24 hectares in Tully, north Queensland. Six months were spent building a boning room. Jervoise processed its first animal soon after it was finished.

Currently, only cattle from the Jervoise properties are processed at the Tully meatworks. Partners and owners Greg and Kerry Jonsson estimate production capacity to be 12 head a week but have some way to go before reaching it.

It has been a big learning curve. Pastoralists by trade, they have had to quickly learn how to process and pack meat. They employ a full-time, experienced butcher to develop retail products such as Jervoise's own brand of sausages.

The sausages are free of gluten and preservatives. Jervoise is developing a tantalising range, including curry, cumin and coriander, chilli, Chinese, herb and garlic, honey and mustard, honey and tamari, plain, ginger and garlic, and tomato and basil.

SUPPLY

All beef go directly from Jervoise station to the processing plant. An average of 5000 head are run on the property of 28,328ha in Far North Queensland, 288 kilometres north-west of Townsville.

The cattle are grazed but extra feed has been required the past few years, although this is expected to be reduced with improved pastures and rotational grazing.

At present, only beef cattle are raised and only Jervoise station animals processed. However, the meatworks is set up to take other animals as well, providing the opportunity to expand.

PROMOTION

About 80% of Jervoise beef is sold directly to the public and 20% to distributors. Jervoise is in the early stages of promoting its beef, with the early focus being on labelling and presentation.



Above: Galah Dam on Jervoise Station.



Right: butcher and slaughterman Nathan Butcher

It sells through several outlets in Cairns and Townsville, Tully and Mareeba. It also has retail customers as far away as Dubbo in NSW, Thursday Island, Tweed Heads and Rockhampton.

Kerry said last year was spent getting the processing plant up and running. This year, more time will be devoted to advertising and promotion.

DROUGHT

Like many regions of Australia, Jervoise station has been somewhat affected by drought, although it is not completely without rain. While production has been affected, there has been an ongoing program the past five years to improve pastures and water.

More than 30km of poly pipe have been laid and several nests of tanks and many troughs installed to ensure adequate water for stock. Paddocks are fenced smaller, grazed less and spelled more often to ensure adequate ground cover remains.

Greg and Kerry have plans to further drought-proof the property. The very small dams will be enlarged, more bores put down, more tanks installed and more troughs put in place. Kerry believes they are halfway towards being as drought-proof as possible.

DISTRIBUTION

Sales are made to order. Jervoise can supply any quantity of any portion of meat the customer wants. Packages are sent via refrigerated transport, so they can be distributed anywhere in Australia. At this stage, none are exported.

WHOLISTIC

Kerry explained that by using a wholistic method of management, they do not have many problems with pests and disease. Most of the problems they had were back in the early days, when they first stopped using dips and sprays 27 years ago.

At that time, they culled according to each animal's tick resistance, keeping those least prone to tick infestation and thus building up the herd's resistance.

Burning also stopped, which meant more ground cover, better protection for new grass shoots and less runoff when

rains came. Once the chemicals disappeared, dung beetles returned, fixing up the fly problem.

Now they are looking at the structure of the soil. As that has improved, so has the quality of pasture, and accordingly, the quality of the animal and meat.

Weeds are biologically controlled whenever possible or manually removed. Kerry regards a weed as an indicator the soil is not happy. Fix that and the weed disappears.

WWOOFING

At different times throughout the year Jervoise takes in WWOOFers, travellers who through the organisation Willing Workers on Organics Farms work on the property in exchange for board. Kerry describes it as a wonderful program through which they have made some lifelong friends.

WEBSITE

Jervoise sells direct to the public and to restaurants and hotels. It is developing its website to enable direct on-line ordering.

There will be a handy feature on the website (technophobes, hang in there), whereby you enter your phone number, your phone rings, and Jervoise picks up the phone from their end. You talk to them for free.

Pretty cool, huh? They hope to have the site finished by the time of publication of this article.

Visit them at <www.jervoiseorganics.com>.

SUMMARY

Jervoise Organics has taken the path that a number of small producers are taking – selling direct to the public, enabling it to maintain a relationship with its end-customers and maximise profits.

Of course, it continues its relationship with distributors and this is bound to grow as production capacity grows. This business model seems to be working well for small specialty producers.

It has worked for vineyards throughout Australia and is working for Jervoise. And, perhaps just as importantly, it supports an important role of organic farming: that of re-connecting consumers with producers. ■

