

# Doing business with cheese

» **Adam Birkby** spoke with the owners of Capra Cheese, one of Australia's most successful producers of specialist cheeses.

**E**mma-Lee and Matthew Gurnsey have always had an organic mindset. Whatever they would do on their 35-hectare property at Mount Taylor, near Bairnsdale Victoria, was going to be organic. So after much deliberation they settled on organic dairy goats and became certified through the BFA/OGA Small Producer Program.

Like many organic producers their initial steps into organics were small. "We started with one goat, milking her by hand in the carport," Emma explains. "We gave away lots of cheese to our family and friends and their feedback was what really sparked our interest in making this a viable business."

They proudly milk their own herd of healthy, free-ranging dairy goats, ensuring a fresh supply of certified organic milk, and they purpose-built a cheese-making facility on farm. Emma believes this has given them quality control of their milk and guaranteed a superior product. "It takes a lot more time, effort and expense but in the long run it's allowed us to make beautiful handmade farmhouse cheeses," she says.

Both Emma, a naturopath, and Matthew, a horticulturist, have agricultural diplomas in Organic Systems. This helped them through the initial stages of setting up the company. They also worked with other cheesemakers to get a feel for the physical demands of the industry.

From humble beginnings with one goat, the Gurnseys now milk 45 in total, providing two to five litres of milk each. As the business grows they hope to increase the milking herd



to 60. "We feel that's about all we could comfortably handle on our own because we want to concentrate on a quality handmade product rather than quantity," she says.

"We're focusing on natural, organic methods because healthy soils and healthy animals make great cheese," Matthew adds. It seems others agree. Capra Cheese was awarded two gold medals at the 11th Annual Australian Specialist Cheese Show in August. Their Allegro and Mountain Ash cheeses beat a list of over 300 competitors. The Gurnseys say it's been a long haul to get to the stage they're at now but are excited by the continuing demand for their cheeses.

They put their success down to remaining an integrated and holistic farm where both of them are involved in everything, from milking the goats to making the cheese as well as the marketing and distribution.

Part of their marketing strategy was to direct-sell much of their produce straight to the consumer through local restaurants, retail produce outlets and farmers' markets. They



admit they were very lucky in the timing of their business. The growth in popularity of Farmers' Markets has given them a fantastic market presence and contributed to their success. "People are increasingly interested in where their food comes from," comments Emma. "They want to source local organic produce. I'm constantly amazed at the questions I'm asked at market. Just a few years ago you'd never hear people discussing food miles!"

The Capra Cheese brand can be found at retail shops throughout Victoria as well as select restaurants and local farmers' markets. Alternatively contact ph (03) 5156 9312. 

