

Riverside farmers choose quality over quantity

Two family farms near Byron Bay in New South Wales' Northern Rivers have downsized, diversified and direct-marketed to secure their future. Both farms grow fewer vegetables overall but produce high quality, sell-at-retail prices and add a margin for organic. And, with the local farmers' market just 10 minutes away, there are very few food-miles from paddock to plate.

Frank and Tanya Walker – and Frank's mum Dell – are third generation farmers outside the village of Upper Burringbar. Their family has come full circle since taking up 600 acres in 1926. They carried out dairy and cropping, then beef and bananas, then major horticulture. Now, Frank has a couple of acres of small crops for the Byron Farmers' Market and, lately, has decided to make cheese.

In a less likely move, Dave and Bron Hancox left the Victorian bush for Melbourne where they worked at running cafes. Years later they escaped to a café at Mullumbimby, bought 10 acres for their daughter's pony, and decided to plough up a couple so it paid its way. Now they've sold the café, moved out to the farm and sell a range of fresh vegetables at various local markets – and from their shed door.

In both family businesses it's a case of Mum and Dad doing most of the work. Walker Farms grows bananas and pineapples on the hills, plus spuds, fresh veges and pumpkins on the creek flat. The rest of the property runs 160 cows. In addition the Hancoxes set up their Fossil Farm stall at eight markets a month, including Byron Farmers – and hold a fortnightly sale at their roadside shed.

Growing small, selling big at the markets

Years ago, Frank Walker's dad employed 14 workers and sent away 500 cartons of tomatoes a day. Now it's just Frank, Tanya and Dell. "We hire someone occasionally but, with just one market, it's not really worth it," Frank says. Dave and Bron acknowledge the long hours in small farming. "I thought I gave up split shifts when I gave up cooking," Dave laughs.

They are rewarded however with a direct customer relationship. They educate people about how food is grown and receive generous compliments in return. "The more we tell people, the more interested they become," Dave comments.

Frank agrees. "When we started at the

Byron Market, people couldn't see why – if Woolies had it, we didn't. Now, they know it's seasonal and are happy to wait for it. We get feedback all the time, which we never got from agents. To hear someone say how lovely our product is is a real pat on the back. Some mums say to their kids 'This is Frank's broccoli – you'll like it'."

Dave enjoys when a mum pops in for carrots and he can give her child a free one.

A FEATURE OF the Byron Farmers Market is the level of honesty and respect between farmers and customers. When a cyclone wiped out the bananas up North, a Byron customer asked Frank if he would raise his prices. "No mate," he said, "they'll be the same price this week as they were last week, and as they were last



year – \$2.50 a kilo." Other banana sellers followed suit. And, for six months, locals queued early outside those stalls rather than pay \$12 a kilo at the supermarket. That unselfish act probably introduced more customers to the Byron Farmers Market than any other event.

Unfortunately for Frank, a week before the cyclone, he cut down a lot of bananas to downsize – bananas that might have returned \$260,000 during the shortage. But he is philosophical: "Money's not all," he smiles. Anyway, Frank doubles as a senior hockey coach and didn't have free weekends to capitalise on the bonanza. "I don't begrudge those that did. Anyone who works in bananas works hard," he says.

"It's good to encourage kids, and it's better than eating a bucket of chips." Kids at the market learn food doesn't just come from a supermarket – and they learn to know the different taste of organic."

The Hancox family started out as market resellers, buying in both organic and conventional produce to on-sell while they developed the farm. "However, when we changed to organic produce only, our profits went up," Dave explains. Their business is growing – but via diversification rather than

quantity. "We used to show up with 300 to 400 lettuce – but people can only buy one or two. Now we've diversified, they still buy a lettuce but a lot of other produce as well," Dave said.

The success of their farm-gate sale surprised Dave and Bron. They sell more in four hours at home than they do all day at a big monthly market. The five kilometre drive from Mullumbimby means many locals will arrive with a pushbike and backpack.

The retail prices mean the Hancox sell lettuce for \$3 – while farmers are lucky to get \$1.50 wholesale. Frank said pumpkin growers might get up to \$2 a kilo for their crop at times, whereas he sells his for \$3 a kilo all year round.

More outcome from inputs

A chemical scare prompted both farmers towards organics. One day at their café Dave and Bron were given some lettuce seedlings so Dave popped them into the horse paddock. "Then the bugs showed up," he recalls. A mate lent him insecticide, but the label recommended using a full body suit, hat, gloves and a mask. "I couldn't understand how that food was allowed to be eaten the next day." So Bron did an organic farming course at TAFE and Fossil Farm was certified with Organic Growers of Australia (OGA).

Frank had seen too many local farmers die before turning 60 through bad practices and chemicals. So Walker Farms was certified with OGA starting with Echinacea then expanding into sweet potatoes. That started a treadmill of supplying Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane – always with fingers crossed over freight costs and commission. It was while discussing agent troubles with a neighbour that Frank learnt of the Byron Farmers Market and joined up.

Both farms strive for "more outcome from input". By farming small and intensively, Dave and Bron maximise their yield. "Now, with a worker – and by buying in compost – we are about 98 per cent productive," Dave tells. Likewise, Frank's veges average up to 1600 cartons an acre whereas the best conventional farmers nearby average only 800 cartons. When his cauliflowers grew to five kilos, Frank had to cut them in half for the market.

Initially, the Hancoxes rotary-hoed and bed-formed and used a Nu-Mulch harvester to cut their own mulch. However that delayed a bed being re-worked until all

plants had gone. Vacant spaces could not be reused immediately.

Now they are developing a no-dig method where they buy in about 40 cubed metres of compost a couple of times a year and wheelbarrow it through their one and a half acres of vegies. When part of a bed is finished, Dave and Bron pull the crop onto the old mulch. This is covered with 10 centimetres of compost, a little fertiliser and new mulch. The bed is replanted the same day if needed.

Both families use driplines or overhead irrigation but still hand-water some crops. "It is more efficient," Dave says. "We water the soil, not the plant. Driplines leak out to the whole bed anyway and don't suit compost – water dissipates too quickly." Dave hand-waters twice a week – more in summer – for about half a day. It's a juggle. "The best time is early morning but that's when we pick. However, watering at the end of the day seems to cause fungal problems."

Similarly, when Frank ploughs a pumpkin patch, he plants three seeds under half a bag of compost then hand-waters just around the seedlings. "It gives them a good start and minimises weeds in the paddock when the sprinklers are used later."

Frank leaves his cultivated soil a little "lumpy" so water will penetrate easily. He rotates his growing patch around the paddock with electric fencing – averaging

three-years between crops and pasture. Near the end, he plants peas to plough back in. The rotations and the diversity mean there is now very little disease.

Once told it was impossible to grow organic broccoli – because conventional crops are sprayed up to 19 times – Frank planted 600 just to see. He successfully harvested all the heads then picked side shoots for another three months. "People went crazy over them." Frank said. "The side shoots mean the crop is not just a one hit wonder." Dave and Bron do the same with celery. Rather than cutting the whole plant they continually pick celery leaves and bunch them.

To diversify, Frank is adding about 5,000 pineapples to his hillside bananas. It marks the return of a crop once so common in the Northern Rivers there was a local processing factory at Alstonville. He also planted 300 kilos of potatoes and 7,000 beetroot. As the beetroot grew, the biggest were pulled for baby beets. "People now know they can eat the leaf as well," Frank says.

A cheese-filled future

Looking ahead, Dave won't be on a wheelbarrow at 60. But he hopes younger staff might allow Bron and himself to stay involved because they believe demand for their produce will continue to grow.

Meanwhile, their income all goes back into the business. "In five years, we've gone from nothing to owning a reasonable farm, tractor, and refrigerated van," Dave smiles.

Frank has a vision of himself as an organic cheesemaker. A lover of mature cheddar, he did a cheese-making course and bought a small, portable milking machine. His Friesian and Brown Swiss cows give enough milk each to make two kilos of hard cheese a day. Frank made his own cheese presses and – when he stumbled on an old butter churn at his uncle's – decided to make butter too.

Over a cup of tea, Frank samples his eight-week-old cheddar (totally gorgeous), soft camembert and brie – and then grills some homemade haloumi (to die for!). He explains cheddar gets even better after 12 months of maturing. Frank will pasteurise milk for commercial cheese production but still uses raw milk to spray mildew, as pasteurised milk won't control it.

The move by both farms into 'small plot, big crop' thinking harks back to an earlier time before industrial agriculture told us to get big or get out. No doubt Frank's grandfather, who did dairy and spuds all those years ago, would approve of Frank's hard cheddar and Sebagos.

Kenrick Riley is a former newspaper editor who farms organically at Georgica in the NSW Northern Rivers.

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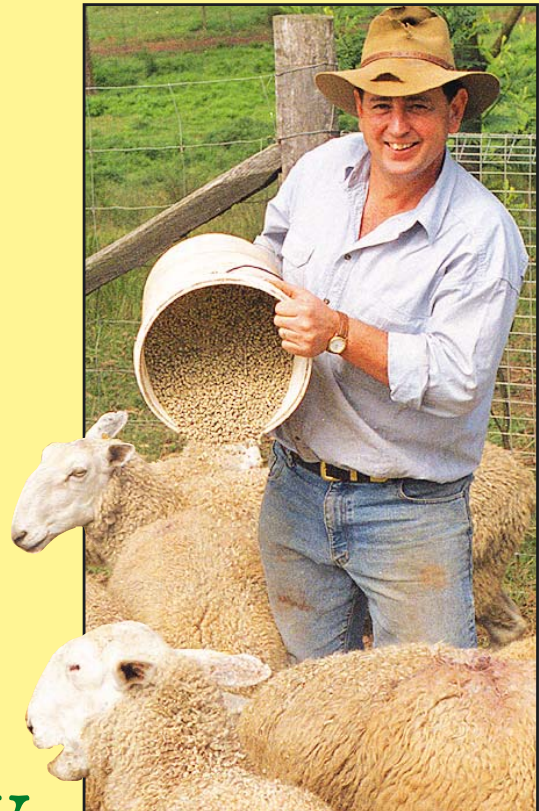
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