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In conversation with a producer and member of the artisan agriculture project advisory group

To follow on the series of conversations with the Artisan Agriculture Project Advisory members, Sharon caught up with Natalie Hardy from Brookland Free Range Farms in Blampied.

Q: (SH) What brought you to wanting to run your own small-scale farm Brooklands Free Range Farm?

A: (NH) A multilayered answer for us, as my husband Jono is a fifth-generation farmer growing up on the family farm in Waimate, South Island NZ, in fact we named Brooklands after the first settled farm by the Hurst family and have a generational “Brooklands Grace” as a thank you for this food. Jono came to Australia with a career in restaurant management. I’m from Melbourne with a career spanning segments of the Veterinary industry from nursing, practice management, Vet Pharmaceuticals rep and Animal Nutrition for Mars Pet care. We both had a passion for clean, good, healthy food and animal welfare.

The call for Jono to return to his roots in farming was strong, we contemplated running the family farm in NZ but then decided to do our own “thing” here in Australia. Our search began in Hepburn Shire area due to the proximity to my family and its soils, climate and water security lending it well to grass fed livestock production. In 2007 we settled on a 20-acre property in Springmount and undertook our journey in small scale farming.



My studies in Equine Herbal Medicine set up our holistic, chemical free approach to farming. Our focus was grass-fed beef and pastured pig productions and with research we decided on breeding and farming rare breeds. Not only did we want to save them from extinction, but they tend to be most suited to a natural approach to farming with their inherit natural foraging instincts that haven't been bred out of them over the generations.

Not long after we settled in Springmount the search for a larger farm began and in 2012, we purchased our current 150 acres in Blampied and lease parcels of land nearby where we see it having the right recipe and opportunity for sustaining productive pastures for rotating our grazing cattle regeneratively.

Q (SH): What products does Brooklands Free Range Farm Produce?

A (NH): As I mentioned we are passionate about rare breeds, so our focus is on the following livestock breeds British White Cattle, Berkshire Pigs and Finnsheep. My passion for British White Cattle and Regenerative Farming has allowed me the opportunity to be on the committees of British White Cattle Association in Australia & the Central Victorian Regenerative Farmers Group which we are currently the trial farm for the North Central Catchment Management Authority.

Our beef products are 100% grass feed beef with cattle on a strip grazing 120-day system encouraging the growth of native grasses and all pigs are bred and raised outdoors on pasture. Our pig paddocks are rotated regularly, and we drill seed salad bar grazing mixes which help build the soils, capture the carbon and feed the pigs whilst they then fertilise for us. We sell at local Farmers Markets paddock to plate Pastured Pork, nitrate free small goods and 100% Grass Fed Beef. Currently sales are 50:50 between the two. The Finnsheep are for hand spinner wool production and have been known to have up to 6 lambs!! Our dream is to support this extremely rare breed here in Australia.

In 2019 we were extremely honoured in winning a National Gold Medal in the 'From the Paddock' category with the delicious Magazine Produce Awards for our 100% Grass Fed British White Beef, and a state award for 2018. We were also extremely grateful to be a recipient of an Agriculture Victoria small-scale grant, to install a watering system for the pigs, develop a website and for the fit-out of a walk in cool room, shop and commercial kitchen, all on farm, which will enable us to have a farm gate, cook products for sale and create a storage room to pack a delivery box system....watch this space!

Q (SH): Why do you think people have turned to buying products direct from farm producers rather than other market channels?

A (NH): Our mission is to provide regeneratively farmed beef and pork products that are healthy for our soils, healthy for the animals and healthy for the eaters that are *HONEST, AFFORDABLE and FARMED TRANSPARENTLY*. Through our regular attendance at farmers markets and sharing our story, people really want to understand the "Why" do we do what we do and how we farm which includes a heavy focus on animal welfare and building our soils naturally. We focus on using the whole animal so there is minimal wastage, and in the winter, we send off the skins to be made into beautiful white rugs. Sharing these stories and others about how we farm educates the consumer, builds strong customer loyalty and new customers grow from this loyalty. We hope to one day return to farm visits when the COVID-19 regulations relax.

Q (SH): What made you interested in the Hepburn Shire Artisan Agriculture Project and the project advisory group?

A (NH): I want to be able to communicate our learnings, struggles, and achievement to help provide guidance to the project and Hepburn Shire to enable and support and share with the region and more broadly. Ultimately, I would like to increase awareness by state governments of the small-scale sector, to better understand the needs of and create support systems of small-scale farming rather than just large, industrial scale. This sector is pivotal to a more reliable and sustainable food chain supply in the future.

Q (SH): What do you feel might be the top two learnings for local small-scale agricultural producers from the Global Pandemic of COVID-19?

A (NH): What we have learnt is how important community is and we need to reach out to both support us and in supporting others. Community to us means our customers and other producers and wider industry. Customers are now understanding that buying local produce is more important than ever, that there is only one person in the chain to get it to their homes and knowing exactly where it came from and how it was raised. We have recently encountered the closure of Farmers Markets at the last hour and in need to find a place to sell more than 300kg of produce within 10 days. Luckily our extending industry networks allowed us to reach out to another market allowing us to hold a stall, and then setting up a free local delivery service otherwise this product may have been wasted and revenue lost. We highly value our local community.

Q (SH) Where can people find out more about you and your products?

A (NH): We are currently building our website, but we are incredibly active on Instagram and Facebook and we would love to have you follow us on these links.

<https://www.instagram.com/brooklandsfreerangefarms/>

<https://www.facebook.com/BrooklandsFreeRangeFarms/>

Q (SH): Natalie, thank you so much for your precious time today and I have one last question. What do you see as the future opportunities for small-scale agriculture producers in the Shire and Central

Highlands?

A (NH): Within the Hepburn Shire we are extremely fortunate to have the diversity of climatic zones and soil types with good water security. However, with all this opportunity I think as a small-scale farmer “what we can do better” is we need to continue to research, educate and improve our regenerative farming practices and care for the soils and our climate and share those education chances more broadly. Sustainable land use and good and nutritious food for generations to come will naturally flow as we harness these opportunities.