

10th November 2020

To follow on the series of conversations with the Artisan Agriculture Project Advisory members, Sharon caught up with Sophia Christoe from Trentham to discuss her various roles with artisan ag.

Q: (SH) What inspired you to become involved in small-scale farming enterprises and related industry associations?

A: (SC) I grew up on my family's mixed cropping and sheep farm in the Goulburn Valley in North Central Victoria – that's Yorta Yorta Country - and this is where my passions commenced, though I didn't realise it at the time. At 15 years old I had my sustainability awakening and wanted "to save the world": I was acutely aware of climate change and that poor farming practices could be contributing to its acceleration. I went on to university to study a science degree with an honours thesis on sustainable agricultural systems and human ecology.



During my studies I explored how short supply chains - where farmers, growers and eaters are more connected - have greater resilience and more ecological benefits than longer supply chains. That really informed my work after uni, supporting the development of localised food supply chains with a stronger social and ecological focus. I organised farmers markets and have been Secretary of Victorian Farmers Markets since 2017. During the day I work with a fantastic small cheese company, Holy Goat, where I milk the goats, help make the cheese then pack and sell it at farmers markets.

Q (SH): What does the Victorian Farmers' Markets Association do?

A (SC): The VFMA is a not-for-profit industry based association assisting small-scale primary producers and specialty makers to access customers and eaters across Victoria, to strengthen our local food system and give shoppers access to fresh, quality produce direct from the farm. We do this by supporting and promoting a network of accredited, genuine Victorian Farmers' Markets, where farmers can sell what they've grown, raised, harvested or made, direct to the eater and get the full dollar value for their efforts. There are more than 35 accredited farmers' markets and hundreds of members across Victoria.

Many people don't understand the difference between an accredited and non-accredited farmers' market. The key difference is that re-sellers (people who buy & on-sell produce someone else has grown or raised) are strictly prohibited at accredited farmers markets. This makes for a fairer marketplace for the producers and greater transparency for the shopper: they can trust they're buying food from someone who's had direct involvement in its production.

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

A (SC): They are starting to understand that not all food is created equal and are looking for greater transparency and meaning in their food choices as a result. There is a powerful level of trust created when producers stand behind a market stall and say to someone, "I made this, and this is how". This eye-to-eye customer and supplier interface is something that long supply chains cannot provide.

I also think building a food relationship based on trust results in a longer term and resilient social bond compared with one mainly influenced by price or convenience. That trust and connection can be a meaningful thing in people's lives, especially if they've been disconnected from their food and farming landscapes in the past.

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

A (SC): One of my main desires is to ensure that young farmers with limited pathways into farming are factored into future discussions not only in Hepburn and Central Highlands but the wider State. I look at this mainly through issues of access to land: the option to purchase land for farming is incredibly competitive and cost-prohibitive around here, so we need to ensure there's protections to the incredible agricultural land in this region to keep it as farmland; and ensure there's other pathways into farming for young people which don't rely on buying land outright as the first step. Being involved in this Project is a way for me to help reinforce that message.

I've also recently been appointed to the Victorian Young Farmers Advisory Council to help with the communication channel from smaller scale farmers through to the Minister for Agriculture, and I hope that I can offer a two-way bridge of information from that Council to the Artisan Agriculture Project, too. In short, it's all about enabling next gen farmers like myself!

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 (SC): My main observation is that diversity is key: producers need to have diverse market channels to create better business resilience. Community supported agriculture schemes (CSA's), farmers markets and farm gate shops have been a real positive for some small-scale producers, because they're going straight to the eater and getting the full dollar value for their efforts. People need to eat, even during a pandemic! So instead of having all of your sales directed to hospitality for example, having direct access to end consumers is key. Another benefit I've observed in my own industry is that specialty cheesemakers have benefited from the limited imports due to the shut-down of international transport: domestic sales have increased and so has the awareness of how excellent Australian specialty cheese can be. Shorter supply chains winning once again!

Q (SH) Where can people find out more about you and the associations you are involved with?

A (SC): The Victorian Farmers' Markets Association website is vfma.org.au. Google 'Young Farmers Advisory Council' to find out more about that. I'd really love to hear from other young farmers in the region about their experiences or concerns and they can email me directly - Sophia.christoe@gmail.com

Q (SH): Sophia, 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 broader Central Highlands?

A (SC): We are so fortunate to live in a remarkable part of the state with access to amazing soils and water, and a climate well suited to grow a range of produce. So we're winning with that. Another opportunity is that we have a very engaged community who want to support people and projects which are giving back to, rather than taking from, the earth: building a farming enterprise and regional food identity based on this will provide us a significant advantage as we look into a climate changed future.