



Happy scratchers: Chris and Ann's hens are rotated to a new paddock every few days

Redbank ORGANIC FARM

Oxhill eggs come from healthy free-roaming hens that live a natural existence at Redbank Organic Farm

Words & photos by Diane Norris

This 200ha organic farm in Wauchope, near Port Macquarie, NSW, is run by Paul and Jenny Eggert, their son Chris and his wife Ann. Family involvement in the business is important to them and Chris and Ann's three young sons take great pleasure in working on the farm, too; they're given meaningful daily jobs, which they enjoy.

Chris is a fourth-generation dairy farmer. The farm was first settled by his great-grandfather. Their business, Eggert Agri-partners, began the conversion to organic in 2000. Before then, they ran a high-input, high-

production, conventional dairy. "We converted to the organic farming system virtually overnight," Chris says.

He says this required a lot of hard work, mistake making, paradigm shifts and a steep learning curve. In 2010 they started a new enterprise of organic pasture-range egg production under the label Oxhill Organics. In January 2013 they took over the whole business, packing the eggs on-farm and handling the marketing and distribution, which, until then, was looked after by two business associates.

They milk about 180 cows, producing one million litres of milk each year, and have

around 2000 laying chickens producing 90–100 dozen eggs a day. "It's hard work but it's worth it," says Ann. "It is especially satisfying when we get positive feedback direct from customers." Farming organically means they can't use any artificial fertilisers, antibiotics or pesticides in the production of the milk or eggs.

FARMING PRACTICES

The farm has a strong focus on recycling nutrients and improving the soil. Instead of hosing down the dairy yard every day, Chris puts down hay to collect the cow manure and then turns this product into compost,



which is used to fertilise the farm. This saves a large amount of water and is an extremely effective method of recycling the nutrients from the farm.

“As the health of the cows has improved from our changed farming methods, so has the manure,” says Chris, “which, in turn, improves the compost; the compost improves the soil and the pasture that the cows eat. This further improves the manure for the cycle to begin again.” Chris, I must say, is a very passionate organic farmer and one of his favourite things about farming is creating his compost.

Crop rotation, controlled grazing and application of various inputs (compost, gypsum, lime, rock phosphate and kelp) to create healthy soils and cows are the main driving forces behind the production of milk.

CHICKEN MANAGEMENT

The chicken “caravans” (movable sheds) are moved every day, giving uniform distribution of nutrients. “By moving the sheds and hens each day, there is a low risk of leaching and volatilisation,” Chris says, “as the biology in the soil is able to assimilate the volume of

nutrients deposited in one day.” He claims this portable method also reduces the smell, and the nutrients are stored in the soil to grow great pastures for the cows and chickens to eat in the next grazing rotation.

The chickens are moved to different paddocks on the farm and within those paddocks. Every three days the chickens go to a fresh paddock using portable electric fence netting. This gives an even graze and ensures there is 100 per cent ground cover when the chickens leave the existing paddock. After the hens are moved out, each paddock is allowed to rest for 40–60 days before anything grazes on it again.

“Keeping the grass new and fresh means the chickens eat a large amount of grass and insects, combined with milk and grain sourced directly from farms that use compost to grow their grain,” Chris says. “This means our customers and our family get awesome eggs to eat, while also improving the chickens’ welfare and the environment in which they live. We also use 100 per cent organic feed for our chickens, which goes beyond the certifying criteria for organic eggs.”

The chickens are not fed protein or soy meal, so they get their protein requirements from the grass, insects and milk.

Also, the chickens are not debeaked or “tipped” (tipping is when a small amount of the beak is taken off). Chris and Ann think it’s essential that the chickens are able to exhibit all their natural behaviours by pecking and scratching at the ground — as nature intended.

FIELD DAYS

Chris and Ann have run quite a number of field days on their farm and have hosted school groups and families, affording participants an educational introduction to life on a farm. They both believe it’s important for people to have a connection with the food they buy and where it comes from. The way the farm is run means it’s possible for visitors to enjoy a hands-on experience that’s fun, educational and safe.

Organic farmers are committed to their way of life and to healthy ecosystems and care for the Earth, which Chris and Ann exemplify. Most importantly, they are passing on their ethos to their sons, who will be the next-generation custodians of Redbank Organic Farm. ■