

Oxhill ORGANICS

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FOURTH GENERATION FAMILY FARM

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Withstanding over 100 years, industrial revolutions and evolving technologies, the Oxhill Organic Farm is now four generations deep. **THE EGGERT FAMILY HAVE WORKED TIRELESSLY TO PRESERVE THE LEGACY AND PROUD FAMILY TRADITION** of farming with innovative success right here in the green hills of Redbank.

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Hi Ann. The beautiful Oxhill Organics Farm has been operating here in Wauchope with a long history and four generations behind it.

Please tell us about your family.

Chris, the manager and joint owner of the business is the fourth generation on the farm. Chris' parents, Jenny and Paul, are still involved in the business with the day-to-day operations and Chris also manages the property with myself and we are helped by our three sons, Lachie, Jimmy and Billy. It definitely is a family affair and we are appreciative of the history and what it has taken those before us to enable us to reach the stage we are at now. We are also hopeful we can continue the farm's ownership into the fifth generation but that will be up to the boys and we are careful that they are free to take their own path in life, whatever that may be.

There's a lot of history here on the farm.

How has it developed and expanded over the years?

Chris' great grandfather was the first to dairy on the property over 100 years ago. Over that period of time there have been many different farming practices, and evolving technologies such as milking machines and tractors as well as generational changes, but it has remained in the Eggert family throughout. The property has seen the industrial revolution

and the introduction of chemical fertilisers. As population grew, the farm expanded through the leasing and purchasing of land to be now a 500 acre farm which is fully certified organic. We have also expanded the number of facets of the business, diversifying into different enterprises to spread our risk and enable more employment opportunities and interesting work for the employees and family members involved in the farm.

Oxhill wasn't always run as an organic farm. When was organic farming implemented and what was the process to becoming certified?

In 2000, when deregulation was implemented, our business suffered a significant financial hit, so we were looking at

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ways to recover those losses. A number of options were suggested by dairy advisers and government employees at the time including increasing herd numbers, building a new dairy and purchasing more land. However, our local milk factory, the

Hastings Co-op, suggested that an option may be to produce organic milk, as there could be a significant price difference. So we decided to go ahead with that option, with very little knowledge of organics. Our knowledge at that time was in running a very input-driven, conventional farm, which was highly reliant on artificial inputs of fertiliser, antibiotics and pesticides. We were also in the middle of a significant drought at the time which made the transition more difficult.

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Although we did notice an immediate improvement in the health of the cows after cessation of the use of artificial inputs such as urea, other changes were slower. Initially, we had a lack of knowledge and confidence but, by reading books, speaking to other farmers in the industry, attending numerous conferences, and trying other farming practices such as compost building and controlled grazing, slowly the farm began to improve. That was when we started to notice an improvement in the health of the farm and the soils. The certification process was three years, so we became fully certified organic in 2003.

No longer just a production farm, you have many other initiatives on offer here. What are you currently running and producing?

Our primary business and source of income is still the dairy. However, over the years we have expanded to other enterprises and sources of income. Now we also produce organic pasture range eggs and directly sell meat including beef, pork and meat chickens. We also run field days occasionally and host veterinary students and trainees. Jenny has also built a yoga centre on the farm where she teaches yoga with some other teachers, with the centre also being utilised for workshops and field days. Compost production is also the core of our business. We produce approximately 1,000t of compost per year which we primarily use on the farm. This enables us to reduce our input costs, as the

base of the compost comes from the dairy yard and laneways, so that the nutrients produced on the farm are able to be kept on-site and utilised over the whole farm to build the health of our soils and build biology and carbon in the soil. Although carbon is not a direct income source, it is our most important asset for the farm and future generations.

You also milk 180-200 cows and are one of the original suppliers of Norco Organic milk, and for many years the only supplier. What was the driving force behind this decision?

We are passionate about the product we produce. We believe that it is important for consumers to have a connection to the product they buy and when they buy Norco milk, they are purchasing from only a handful of family-owned farms who supply a Co-op which is wholly Australian owned with farmers who all have shares in the Co-op. Norco has been very supportive of our business since we started supplying them with organic milk in the mid 2000s. They are understanding of the nature of our business and the challenges we face with droughts and floods.

Soil health is important and we really need to hone in on taking care of it. As a large-scale farm, does this supersede

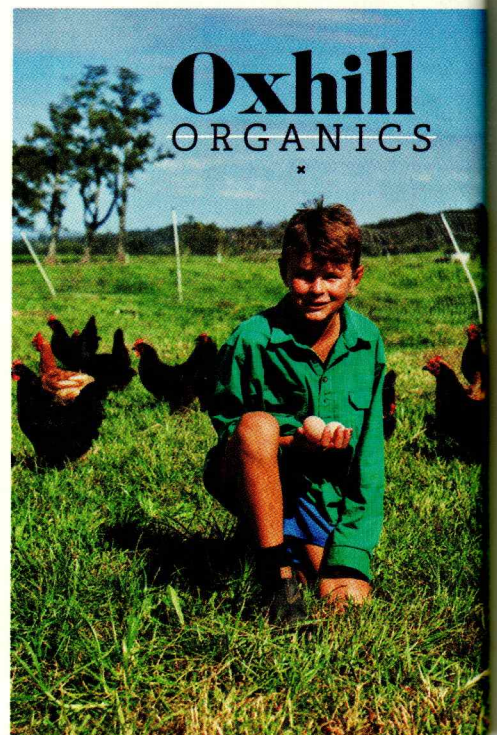
the focus of the farm's operations?

Whether you are a large- or small-scale farm, soil health should always be at the core of your management. It is essential to ensure the sustainability of your farm in the long term. It is absolutely viable and imperative financially to look after soil health, no matter the scale of your operation. Before we converted to organic production, we were

relying almost solely on brought-in inputs to produce our outputs, as the nutrients in our soil were locked up in unhealthy and hard soils. This created a significant cost to our business. With increasing soil health, we were able to unlock nutrients in our soils and all our inputs were building capital in our soil, as opposed to how

it was before, when fertiliser was an annual cost which only increased every year. As I mentioned above, the centre of our whole farm is compost production. We try to keep

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as closed a system as possible by cycling the nutrients throughout our farm. We also use mulch and sawdust as a source of carbon in our compost. A lot of this product would otherwise be disposed of, so we are using it to increase the biodiversity in the biology of our soils and build carbon.

And at the same time education around our food systems is so imperative. Education is very important to Oxhill and you host workshops and tours covering this area. Tell us more about this.

Direct consumer education and contact is an essential part of our business. We believe that the connection between consumers and where their food comes from is in danger of being lost. There is a lot of fear and misinformation about food production and people are being removed from direct contact with the source of their food because of fears of biosecurity breaches. We are trying to remediate this by re-establishing connections. Connections between people and their natural environment are essential for a number of reasons. Over the last few years, we have run field trips for local primary and high schools which are becoming increasingly popular. On the excursions, we keep cows back from the morning milking so that the students can see the cows being milked. We also feed the calves and then take a walk down the farm where they can see the chickens and our free-range pigs. Children have an innate curiosity and thirst for knowledge and they are the future consumers who will make decisions on what they buy based on their experiences throughout their life. If they can appreciate the work that goes into producing food, and understand concepts such as reducing food miles and purchasing products that are produced sustainably/organically, not only will that help the local economy, but it will contribute to their health through consumption of nutrient dense foods free of artificial additives. We also hope that it may inspire some of them to consider agriculture as a potential career pathway that is enjoyable and profitable.

People are wanting to connect and know

more about where their food comes from, who grew it and how it was grown.

What do you love the most about the consumers' interest and support?

As well as educating consumers, it is beneficial for our wellbeing, attitude and enthusiasm for what we do to have direct input from the consumers who buy our products. We enjoy the positive feedback and interaction with our customers as it inputs meaning and intent into our day-to-day activities. We are available and transparent to our customers through social media and our phone number is on our egg carton so customers are able to have direct contact with the producer, something which is quite rare in today's mass food production environment.

Where can people get their hands on your fresh produce?

We sell our eggs locally at Ken Little's, Growers Market and Wild Culture Organics in Port Macquarie and at EcoWild in Wauchope. We also go to the Wauchope Farmers Market on the fourth Saturday of every month where we sell our eggs and meat, and make bacon and egg rolls using rolls from Urban Grain bakery in Port Macquarie. The meat we have available from the farm is all grown on the farm. We have pork, beef and chicken which are all rotated regularly on our fresh, diverse, organic pastures. Contact us directly if you are interested in sourcing some of our fresh

produce from the farm.

What's next for Oxhill Organics?

Now we have received significant, welcome rainfall after suffering through the drought of the last two years, it is onwards and upwards from here. We are continuing with all the enterprises we have now and hope to get back to excursions which were halted due to COVID-19. We want to continually improve the products we are producing through the betterment of our landscapes and community by increasing soil health, planting trees, and developing deeper relationships with our customers, employees and the farming community. Now there are a quite a number of farms which are embracing direct sell methods and using regenerative methods of farming on their properties, so it is an exciting time for agriculture. If you would like to learn more about our farming methods and the journey we have been through since converting to organic production, you can listen to Chris' podcast interview with Charlie Arnott on "The Regenerative Journey with Charlie Arnott", Season 2, Ep. 22 <https://charliearnott.com.au/s2-e13-chris-eggert/>

Thanks Ann.

Contact details:

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