

News

In part three of our look at WA farmers carving out their own path to market, livestock reporter Rebecca Turner caught up with the Cashmores at Hyden, who went down the biodynamic lamb road with great results

Biodynamic meets health aim

Just inside the rabbit proof fence between the pre-historic granite monoliths of King Rock and Wave Rock at Hyden, is the home of biodynamic Cashmore Meats.

The Demeter Certified Nyonger Farm, which has been in the Cashmore family since 1952, runs Dorper prime lambs, hoggets and mutton.

The family farm, which has a proud history, was turned over to biodynamics in 1992.

By 1995 the property had been certified Demeter by the Biodynamic Research Institute (BDR) and it is now audited every year by them as agent for the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.

The Cashmores, keen to create their own little niche in the lamb market, created Cashmore Meats and took control of the product integrity - from paddock to plate.

But John and Bernadette Cashmore's journey has not been without its challenges.

The Cashmore Meats brand was first launched in 2005, distributing fully processed and packaged lamb to various organic outlets in Perth, but after the first six months, strain started to show in the processing chain.

In late 2006, the Cashmores sold the 'carcasses' to Mondo's Butchers, who also used the Cashmore Meats brand for marketing.

But when the Cashmore's closest abattoir at Corrigin closed temporarily in 2008, so did their brand until it was relaunched at the beginning of this year.

While the Corrigin abattoir has organic certification its closure held Cashmore Meats back. While it was closed last year Cashmore lamb was sold into the conventional lamb market.

Fortunately, this year Corrigin abattoir is in operation again and it is John and Bernadette's ultimate aim to continue marketing their branded lamb and mutton.

"The Corrigin abattoir has now been taken over by local farmers Damian and his father, Wayne Connolly, who are very interested in supporting us," John said.

"As the Corrigin abattoir is 150km away from us and is now being run by people with a farming background, we are hopeful this will be a successful partnership."

Sales have so far relied on word of

Cashmore Meats
WHO: John & Bernadette Cashmore
WHERE: Hyden.
WHAT: Biodynamic lamb and mutton

mouth with the tyranny of distance standing in the way of a more aggressive marketing campaign which has seen the success of other WA meat brands. However, this has not discouraged the Cashmores from producing top quality biodynamic lamb and mutton to be sold under their Cashmore Meats label.

Bernadette said they had received a lot of support from the WA Slow Food Group which has raised awareness of their lamb and sheep meat produce.

She said one of her biggest frustrations with increasing brand awareness has been their great distance from larger communities which prevented them from being able to attend farmers' markets and provide taste samples for consumers.

"Initially we tried to keep in control of our produce until it was sold to the consumer, but we found this approach wasn't working," Bernadette said.

Finding a wholesaler to help distribute Cashmore produce was the next step in the supply chain they needed to achieve.

This has been a very difficult task and so the Cashmores now intend to become members of the WA Organic Growers Meat Co-op (www.organicmeats.com.au).

Like the Cashmores, co-operative members are passionate about producing quality meat which is grazed on natural pasture and grown without the use of synthetic pesticides and herbicides, reproductive or growth hormones, veterinary pharmaceuticals, artificial fertilizers, genetically modified organisms and force-fed grains.

In time, the Cashmores would like to market their produce within the co-operative under their Cashmore Meats label.

John said raising consumer awareness of the better taste of biodynamic mutton was another issue he was passionate about because he preferred it to hogget or lamb.

"Everyone knows lamb and some people prefer to eat hogget, but no-one ever mentions mutton as their preference. Perhaps this is due to its old reputation of sometimes having an ammonia aroma and taste," he said.

"Our biodynamic mutton has no



Bernadette and John Cashmore run biodynamic Dorpers for their business, Cashmore Meats, at Hyden. Photos: Danella Bevis

strong odour; just tastes delicious. Last Christmas at our extended family lunch, a selection of meats, including some of our cold mutton, was served. The mutton proved the most popular."

Bernadette said she had learnt that developing demand for your brand came down to telling your story well.

"If people know you they buy your life story of paddock-to-plate and they can take a farm tour anytime at our website www.nyonger.com," she said.

"If you are selling produce with a label it is your name they are buying, not just the produce.

We are proud of our produce. Being biodynamic, we know that what we are selling people is health enhancing and delicious." Bernadette said that while biodynamic meat might cost more than non-organic meat, consumers would soon realize they did not need to eat as much before feeling satisfied and nourished.

"Generally people don't think about nourishment when comparing produce - most just want to buy the cheapest available," she said.

"Cashmore Meats targets the top end of the market or educated consumers who choose to eat

healthier, high-quality, biodynamic produce."

The Cashmores' property is one of the smallest in the area, totaling 5000 acres of which only 4000 are arable. The rest is fenced off remnant vegetation.

The farm runs a three-year rotation. A lot of effort is put into recovering degraded soil and enhancing pastures by growing saltbush in areas which previously were supporting nothing but salt. John said that with biodynamics all grasses and weeds became more palatable for sheep. This helped with weed control in cropping while repairing and stabilizing the soil.

The Cashmores have also been involved in saltbush trials, working towards rehabilitating some of the salt-affected areas of their farm.

One of their most recent saltbush projects was known as 'enhancing valley floor environments'.

Thirty five hectares were planted last August through a project run by the University of WA, Saltland Pastures Association and the Department of Agriculture and Food.

The project aims to bring productivity back to the land using vegetation rather than deep drains

which has been used in many other areas of the Wheatbelt.

The Cashmores continue to plant saltbush along cropped fence lines to provide a living haystack for their sheep.

"Saltbush provides a wonderful balance - the sheep do well on it and it reduces the water table," John said.

The Cashmores run 900 breeders and are increasing their flock.

Five years ago they began using Dorper rams over their Merino ewes and now most of their flock is made up of F1 to F4 ewes.

Ultimately, we aim to produce more than 2000 lambs a year. At the moment we are turning off about 450 lambs a year, plus hoggets and mutton.

"Next year 1200 matings will take place and I hope the multiple births continue to increase.

"When our breeding ewe numbers reach 1200 we will move from a majority of F1 Dorpers to F2 and continue this pattern until we are running the strongest Dorper flock we can."

John said the only problem with the Dorper was that they were much harder on fences.

"I think if they weren't so hard on fences there wouldn't be so many Merinos left in this State," he said. "Merinos are working hard to lamb just once a year, whereas Dorpers can cope with lambing three times every two years, creating a much better turnover and cash flow. Dorpers are also tougher from the time they hit the ground, with many reaching more than 35 kg in five months. They have a higher meat to bone/ fat ratio which is what consumers want."

John said while taking more control of their supply chain was a daunting task; he was committed to becoming more economically, as well as environmentally, sustainable.

"I'm still learning even though I have been farming for 44 years," he said.

"If our dream comes true it could be extremely beneficial for everyone from the paddock to the plate."

"Our main goal for the farm is to remain environmentally sustainable, be profitable, make it easier to run and provide top-quality, health-enhancing, delicious food for consumers."

