

# **ORGANICS – THE ROAD TO ACHIEVING OUR DREAM OF ORGANIC FARMING AND PROCESSING AND MARKETING OUR OWN MILK**

**Robin Greer**

## **Introduction**

About eight to nine years ago we decided we needed to change some of our priorities on our farm.

Motivated by the deaths of our fathers when we were teenagers, we have always explored reasons for cancer and other illnesses.

All our research has suggested that there are links between food and its production and many illnesses, especially the chemicals and preservatives in food.

So we started down the track of farming with fewer chemicals, never thinking that we would eventually farm organically. That was only for long haired jandal wearing radicals.

So we went so far down the track we only had to drop antibiotics, and ragwort spray, to be certified organic. All this was because we felt morally that we couldn't farm how we had been, not because of organic premiums, because there were no organic premiums for milk in Southland.

## **What is organic dairy farming?**

It is using biology to farm, rather than chemicals e.g. no chemical fertilizers, no chemical herbicides or pesticides and no antibiotics.

So this means we have to be proactive rather than reactive.

Since 1992 I have always had a dream to process our own milk by having a cheese factory on our own farm.

When we decided to get organic certification with BioGro, we decided we should look at processing our own milk so people could have the choice of buying organic cheese.

I started researching cheese making on the Net, reading books and experimenting making cheese. Lois and I went to a two day cheese making course run by Dave Milner, a very experienced, knowledgeable and extremely helpful man. This really motivated me that I could make cheese.

I then spent one day a week in Lois' kitchen, experimenting with different recipes until I was happy we had recipes that would produce quality cheese, that consumers would want to purchase and enjoy.

Then there was the factory. After much research we decided on a business in Palmerston North to provide the plant and advise on the building of our factory. We then went to Australia

and visited nine small factories seeking ideas and advice. During this visit we decided that we would add yoghurt and milk to the list of products.

What started as a small cheese factory began to grow to a factory that would produce a range of cheese, yoghurt and fresh milk. To get to this stage was all very enjoyable and rewarding, making progress for the work put in.

Then I came across the bureaucrats. Southland District Council and Environment Southland, once I found the right people to deal with they were very helpful.

But some of the people in AsureQuality and Food Safety that we dealt with for the risk management plan would be the most PC, unprofessional, unproductive and unpractical people that I have ever come across in my life. It is very obvious that within these two organizations we have a culture that is extremely harmful to our country. These people make the people administering the Resource Management Act look like angels.

We had our factory all built and ready to operate and I considered mothballing it, because of the people at AsureQuality and Food Safety, until I learnt how fearful these people are of Rodney Hide. I have never voted for Act or Rodney Hide but I assure you that these people's attitudes changed drastically when I said I would talk to Rodney Hide about our situation. I must clarify that there are some, even if very few, people in these organizations that are helpful.

So we did eventually get passed all this, and get operating in October 2008.

That was the factory, then there was the packaging and branding.

This was all much more exciting and rewarding. We settled on Retro Organics as our brand and employed a friend to develop our labels and artwork which is very effective.

Then come December 2008 we started selling our cheese.

Marketing is relatively easy if you are passionate about what you are selling. So for me I enjoy marketing our cheese, it is a challenge not a job.

So would I like to do it all again?

Probably not, unless there were some major changes within the culture of the bureaucrats.

But it is extremely rewarding being in control of the complete process from soil to table, and seeing people enjoying our product. While you and your staff can have the satisfaction of supplying a manufacturer with quality milk, Lois and I and our staff have the satisfaction of supplying our customers with a product that they enjoy, and we get positive feedback which is very satisfying.

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Notes:

## **Returns**

### ***Factory***

If we have our factory running to capacity then there is great potential to earn very good returns.

But we are doing this because we are passionate about producing quality organic dairy products so people have that option when they do their shopping. One day the factory will run to capacity but that will be when we get there, rather than producing because we have the capacity.

### ***Farm***

We are farming organically because we are passionate about healthy food and living. If we were farming solely for profitability we would probably have to farm conventionally - remembering there is no premium paid for organic milk in Southland.

## **Challenges**

I've covered the ones relating to the bureaucrats so I won't go there again.

Within the factory it's about continually producing quality product.

Within marketing, it's about quality product, service and getting our story out there to the consumers. The news media have been extremely helpful to us with this.

## **Farming**

The biggest challenge is dealing with mastitis without antibiotics. If this could be overcome then more dairy farmers would farm organically. For us who have not been physically doing the farm work, we need staff that are passionate about what we are doing. To my surprise, there are more people out there that think like we do than I thought there were.

Lois and I can only do what we do because of our quality staff, that are such an important part of our business.

I believe being organic is far more acceptable today than it was 15 years ago.

Also I need to point out I am not anti Fonterra. Like most farmers I don't agree with everything they do but Fonterra is extremely valuable to the New Zealand farmer and the New Zealand economy. There is still room however, for the very small niche market players like us.