

Ballance Farm Environment Awards

**LIC DAIRY FARM AWARD
NZFEA TRUST HABITAT IMPROVEMENT AWARD
PGG WRIGHTSON LAND AND LIFE AWARD**

Tim & Jo Loe - Oporua

BFEA SUPREME WINNERS 2009



Tim Loe and the South Wairarapa property “Oporua” have come a long way in their 22 years together.

The farm was larger, and a sheep and beef unit, when Cantabrian Tim arrived in the Kahutara district south of Featherston to take on the job of managing the place for its new owners, Wellington men Alfie des Tomb and Simon Crawford.

Three years after arriving, Tim began farming some of his own stock on the property. “They have always been great to be in partnership with,” he says of the men who are now his former bosses.

Tim Loe could tell you a thing or two about positive partnerships, compromise, steep learning curves and imaginative solutions. These days on part of Oporua he runs what the award judges described as “a well organised farming operation”. It’s a dairying business that ticks all the boxes for Fonterra’s best farm practises, the judges said, and “the owners have created a strong net equity, a viable and sustainable structure”.

One block of the original sheep and beef farm is now a 189ha (163ha effective) dairy farm, owned since 2005 by Tim, his wife Jo and two equity share partners. The 202ha support block two kilometres up the road is used for a combination of cropping, supplementary feed supply and fattening/grazing. It is leased in a long-term arrangement from Alfie des Tomb and Simon Crawford.

When the dairy farm was converted 15 years ago, Tim and Jo took a giant leap into the unknown. Tim bypassed the traditional pathway and went straight from dry stock farm manager to 50/50 sharemilker. It was not a move for the faint-hearted, he says, but an opportunity not to be turned down for anyone with an ambition to own a farm. He did all the development



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Tim & Jo Loe - Oporua

for the conversion, installing the necessary drainage, fencing and water systems. And not surprisingly he became a great supporter of local dairy farming discussion groups in those early years, as he scrambled to acquire dairying knowledge.

Originally 326 cows were milked but that number has lifted to 528 Friesians this season. Production in the past few years has ranged between 190,000-194,000kgsMS. The dairy farm has irrigation over half of it's area and a spray effluent irrigation system over 26ha. Contour is flat with a small area of sand hill ridges.

The leased block is the same contour with around 20ha of sand hill ridges. It's used for growing crops of barley or peas for sale, triticale for silage for the Oporua herd and rearing and fattening bull calves. Farming the bull calves instead of taking in grazers allows them to utilise the grass available, but the flexibility to offload in favour of the core dairying operation when required.

Tim's connection with the land that originally comprised Oporua has taken many twists and turns. He and Jo have a deep appreciation of the place on which they have brought up their four children Megan, Joseph, James and Sophie who range in age from 25 to 17 years.

They took their first step into ownership of the land two years after the dairy conversion. At the time all the houses on the property were on what is now the leased support block. Herd numbers were increasing and with it the need for labour, and housing. The Loes understood that the farm owners didn't want to tie up any more capital, so a novel win-win situation was created. The dairy farm was valued and the cost of a new house at the time was assessed at being 10 per cent of that value. So the Loes put up the capital for the house and became 10 per cent shareholders in the property. Three years later they threw their cows and machinery into the mix and became equal thirds partners with the two Wellington owners.

Four years ago the owners wanted to sell the dairy unit off. Jo, by now a rural and residential real estate agent, marketed the property, which brought her and Tim into contact with two people they felt they could continue to farm the place with. A new equity share partnership with Bruce McKenzie and Mike Falloon was created and the dairy unit purchased. The Loes lifted their share to just under 40 per cent.



JUDGES POINTS

- Solid milking platform and dairy operation.
- Top level per cow and per ha production.
- A sizeable lease dairy support block that not only supports dry stock, winter spelling and supplementary feed requirements but allows for alternate cash and feed cropping as well as grazing/fattening income.
- A well organised farming system with good staffing and support in place.
- Very good understanding of the property soils, both in terms of productivity and risk factors.
- Intensive network of open and sub surface drains supported by intensive mole drainage.
- All open drains fenced for stock exclusion,
- Excellent pasture swards with a very noticeable clover content.



What is now the dairy farm was in what Tim calls “a native state” when he arrived there. It was a bare block, part of a bigger property that included the current lease block. The land had been in long-term ownership and never intensively farmed. On what is now the dairy farm, there was no power and water, and it had never been ploughed.

In his capacity as manager of the sheep and beef farm Tim set about developing the land when he first arrived. There were some unprotected stands of native bush that Tim recognised as rare on the lowlands, and made sure they did not fall in the path of the farm progress. He has gradually worked to protect four blocks, totalling 10.8 hectares. They have been fenced off and native perimeter planting has been undertaken as required. The first block to be fenced is regenerating “quite nicely” now says Tim and some new bird life is evident. The main house on the farm backs onto this bush for an effect the judges describe as “impressive aesthetics”. Their intention is to protect these four stands of bush with covenants “if we were to move”.

Tim’s policy is to farm with his eye on the future, both in land stewardship terms and with the expectation that farming activities will be increasingly restricted and regulated to meet consumer demand.

They use the Overseer programme, soil test annually, and apply what fertiliser is required selectively. Nitrogen application is kept to a minimum. No cows are induced and they consistently use less water than they have consent for.

There are heavier soils on the property, so irrigation is limited at certain times of the year. The judges commended Tim’s efforts to protect the soil and minimise pugging. They wrote: “There is a good understanding of the property’s soils, both in terms of productivity and risk factors.”

Half the farm is irrigated “and that’s enough” says Tim. There are times when they could use up to their limit for water, but Tim says that puts pressure on the system and could lead to trouble with specifics like the pump. His aim, he explains, is always to strive for “a good balance”.

He has devised an innovative system to counter the heavy iron content in the farm’s water supply. The water is aerated as it is pumped into a pond through a pipe with small holes along it. When the water hits the air, the iron oxidises. It settles in the bottom of the pond. The water is then pumped into a second pond “and by then it’s pretty much clear”, reports Tim.

Tim and Jo both enjoy the community they live in, with their involvement through the years ranging from Playcentre establishment through to coaching the local senior rugby side.

Tim values the farm’s three full-time staff and asked for them to be mentioned by name: Rob Vickers (dairy unit manager), Ray Fryer and Josh Lloyd.

- *Soil testing completed and fertiliser applied under the recommendation of the Overseer programme. Minimal use of N fertilisers generally less than 40 kg/ha/annum.*
- *Fencing and protection to areas of lowland native bush including supplementary planting in light canopy areas.*
- *Good levels of community involvement and participation.*
- *Equity partners / owners have created a strong net equity*





NGA WAKA VINEYARD ROGER PARKINSON & (VINEYARD MANAGER) MIKE KERSHAW

BALLANCE NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT AWARD HILL LABORATORIES HARVEST AWARD

The quest for quality wine – the basis upon which Nga Waka’s firm Martinborough foundations are laid – was set in motion when Roger Parkinson’s father Gordon made a career move to Europe in the 1970s.

The Parkinsons gained an awareness and appreciation of excellent wine when Gordon Parkinson took up a Foreign Affairs posting in France. “From that,” recalls Roger, “the family got an idea of what fine wines were like.” French wine differed from much of the wine produced in New Zealand at that time, but as the years passed Roger says both he and his parents could see “there was great potential for New Zealand to match those fine wines of France”.

Fuelled by some serious wine tasting, buying and reading, Roger’s interest in grape growing and winemaking had by the mid 1980’s progressed to where he was keen to “take the next step”. He had no experience in primary production, but his timing was right. His parents were still working in Europe, but their gaze had begun to turn towards retirement in New Zealand. And most importantly, wines from grapes grown in the Martinborough area were beginning to attract attention for all the right reasons. “The reason for the region being planted in grapes was based on good science, so we thought we’d give it a go.”

In 1986 the first four hectares of what was to become the home base of Nga Waka Vineyard, in Martinborough, was

purchased. A year later an adjoining one-hectare block was added. “My parents had the money and I was the labour, the implementer,” explains Roger.

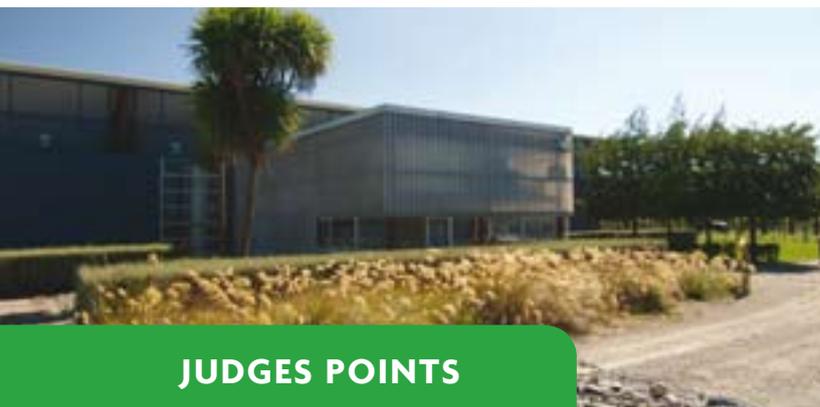
He established the vineyard, contracted the management while the vines matured, and headed for Roseworthy Agricultural College in South Australia to gain a postgraduate wine diploma. Roger stayed on in Australia for industry experience, returning in 1992 in time to take on the first Nga Waka vintage, 1993.

There followed a pattern of expansion to present day where Nga Waka Vineyard now covers 11.5ha managed by Roger and his “right-hand man” since 1996, vineyard manager Mike Kershaw. Seven hectares in two blocks are owned and 4.5ha in three blocks are either long-term leased or owned by shareholding.

The award judges have described Nga Waka as a “solid, well run operation”, commending Roger and Mike’s working relationship, and their ability to expand whilst still maintaining “tight control on management practises”.

Around 6000 cases of wine are produced annually, but extra grapes purchased from contract growers will see that rise to an estimated 12,000 cases of pinot noir, chardonnay, riesling and sauvignon blanc wines by 2010.

However there are no plans for further expansion “at this stage”. The focus is more on “fine tuning what we’ve got”, says Roger. He is confident this is an ongoing process, both because of the success of his working partnership with Mike, and through their active membership of the industry group, Sustainable Winegrowing NZ.



JUDGES POINTS

- *A solid well run operation. Very good working relationship between the Owner and the Vineyard manager.*
- *Excellent monitoring of climate, soil moisture, and plant health.*
- *Very good understanding of the science in relation to all vineyard and winemaking issues.*
- *Using straw mulch to improve weed control and lessen soil moisture loss under the vine.*
- *Active in employing and accrediting suitable seasonal labour.*
- *Active member of the Sustainable Viticulture NZ.*





Being “hooked into the system” via this group allows them to take sustainability beyond the concept and ideal of land stewardship for following generations he says. It is a forum and network for constant improvement in all aspects of sustainable practises in the wine industry, using collective knowledge and scrutiny through “scorecards” which serve to raise baseline standards.

“The manual for best practise is continually being revised,” says Roger. “This industry organisation is a powerful tool and a grounded system. Information from things that are happening at grass roots level can filter up through the broader system very quickly. It’s designed to push for better ways.”

Since early this decade Roger and Mike have been trialling the use of mulches in the under-vine area and root zones of their vines. Getting it right means maximum weed suppression, and efficient application of water and fertiliser. They have been using combinations including straw and bark and they are also watching with interest via Sustainable Winegrowing NZ other mulch trials using material like mussel shells.

Some of the results of the mulch trials have been “startling”, says Roger, with water requirement reduced by 40 per cent in one area. Worm counts are up and increased soil micro flora activity allows plant uptake of non-soluble

nutrients. Some of the mulched blocks have not required the application of any soil-based fertilisers for up to three years.

Monitoring of their vines goes beyond visual checks. Ground tension is measured using tensiometers installed at three root levels. Correctly interpreted, this data gives an accurate soil moisture indication. Soil, leaf and petiole tests are conducted annually at specific times.

Much value is also placed on human input. “People are everything really,” says Roger. He worked in human resources prior to his shift to the wine industry so understands the importance of a good workforce. He appreciates the long-term relationship he has with the contractor who provides most of the seasonal workers required at Nga Waka. And he enjoys working with Mike. Roger knew him before Nga Waka was fully set up; Mike worked for the company contracted to do all the mechanical work. “I suppose you could say I poached him,” says Roger. “You could see he had much greater potential than just carrying out day to day vineyard work.”

Mike and his wife Jenny live in Martinborough. Their son Coby (16) is working one day a week at the vineyard this year as he aims towards an agricultural qualification.

Roger also lives in Martinborough with his wife Carol and their children Henry (13) and Ella (9). Roger’s parents have returned from overseas service and retired in Martinborough.



JUDGES POINTS

- *Soil moisture data is matched to irrigation requirements.*
- *Foliar, petiole and soil nutrient samples are tested to derive the fertiliser and trace element requirements*
- *Strong community involvement*
- *Costs appear tightly controlled*
- *Views discussion groups as essential to expanding knowledge*



JOHN (JR) VAN VLIET & JAMIEE BURNS JR'S ORCHARD



GALLAGHER INNOVATION AWARD

JR and Jamiee's confidence and commitment flies in the face of some commonly held perceptions of the pip fruit industry.

The Greytown couple have just completed an 18-month, \$2.4million project to cover 80ha of their 135ha property in high tech netting, and they're certain the netting will pay for itself within three years. Business, they say, is good, with markets opening up for the quality fruit they are in no doubt they can consistently produce in the Wairarapa climate, now they have the netting.

The award judges liked their can-do, innovative approach to operating their apple and pear business, and their attention to detail. "Strong courage," noted the judges, and "sheer enthusiasm and very pro-active in solving problems in a perceived difficult industry". The judges commended JR and Jamiee's "strong partnership". They have clear roles in the business and live on the property with their daughter Melissa (4).

Formerly a fireman and a shorthand secretary, JR and Jamiee purchased their property, situated three kilometres east Greytown, six years ago from a group of investors who were keen to exit the industry. They took a chance to do so, selling "everything we had" including 40ha of pip fruit trees JR had built up from his original four hectare property on the west side of Greytown.

Six years on they have secured themselves a credible foothold in the industry, employing up to 115 workers in their peak time. They have lifted the production of the place from 40,000 cartons a year to 158,000, without planting any new trees. "Its been a struggle," JR admits, "but now we're making money".

In addition to the net canopy they've invested in facilities on the property, recognising the importance of coolstore, handling and transport infrastructure in their quest for maximising return for their produce, which is all exported.

They had to do the rounds of the banks

before PGG Wrightson backed their netting canopy project, which is the largest continuous net cover in the country.

"It seems like a lot of money, but when you do the numbers, it stacks up," says JR. They predict their production will rise another 40,000 cartons with the netting. "We have a US buyer who will take all the pears we can grow, and he wants us to plant more.

"We used to have to spend \$140,000 a year on hail insurance alone, it was a bank requirement," explains JR. "Worrying about the hail is in the past now." Other benefits of the netting include eliminating bird, sun and wind damage, minimising insect damage, reducing water loss from the soil and controlling spray drift.

Between 1000 and 1500 store lambs are fattened under the fruit trees from harvest completion through till the spring. "They love those fermenting apples on the ground," says JR, "and they make a good job tidying up the grass and fertilising while they're at it."

Twenty hectares of the orchard is in a flood zone, this is used for grazing and in the summer baleage is made. JR has planted five hectares of pines, a forestry woodlot that also provides the orchard protection from the destructive northwest and southerly winds. The Papawai stream boundaries the property on three sides.

The property adjoins the Papawai pa, which JR says in the 1880s was home to a Maori parliament and 3000 people, "that's a few more than the population of Greytown today". In WWII a rifle range on the place was heavily used by American troops. They recognise and respect these historic features.

JUDGES POINTS

- Sheer enthusiasm and very pro active in solving problems in a perceived difficult industry.
- Major infrastructure improvements such as Protective netting, new coolstores, covered and temperature controlled loading facilities, grading machines, accommodation of seasonal labour, global gap quality assurance.
- Strong courage to invest in new systems.
- Strong partnership with excellent individual skill sets.
- Excellent knowledge of how markets work and readily adaptable to their requirements.
- Committed to fruit quality with excellent grading, tracking and audit processes.
- Excellent pest and disease monitoring, assisting in timely pest management treatments.
- Are a TESCO direct supplier.
- Active adjustment to the varietal production through grafting and planting of new varieties.



ERINGA – MANAGER DANIEL HOUSTON,
OWNERS KEITH & SHONA MASLIN

SILVER FERN FARMS LIVESTOCK FARM AWARD



The successful three-way partnership that drives this farming business began in 2001 with the purchase of Eringa, a 380ha property in the Longbush district, south east of Masterton.

Keith and Shona Maslin, from Karori, had sought out farm advisor Phillip Guscott to assist them into sheep and beef farm ownership. Daniel Houston was appointed manager and it's been full-steam ahead for him and his wife Jo ever since. Three adjoining properties have since been purchased - the most recent in November - and the Eringa landholding now totals 1050ha.

The award judges commended Daniel's high level of enthusiasm and the "excellent" relationship between the Maslins, the Houstons and Phillip Guscott. They wrote: "The manager is empowered to get on with farm improvement and has hands on financial control."

Daniel admits good time management is essential, undertaking development and amalgamation work in addition to regular farm work with the help of just one staff member, a "full-time casual" who lives off the property. This season they wintered 4200 Kelso composite ewes, 1500 hoggets and 150 beef breeding cows and their offspring.

The past seven years have been a moving feast of challenges presented by the seemingly regular purchase of additional blocks. "Every couple of years there seems to be another farm," Daniel says. But he refers to his work as "a true managers job", welcomes the test, and appreciates the trust he is afforded. "I'm as keen and passionate about it now as I was when I started, so that's got to be good," he says. The judges also noted this, writing, "the manager farms as if the property was his own".

The majority of the land is medium hill, with some steep faces. About a quarter is easy rolling. Regrassing, a programme the judges described as "outstanding", has focused on the most

productive areas, while in the past three years they have worked to a policy of retiring less productive areas. "Working with the Greater Wellington Regional Council, we are taking out those rough, dirty corners and planting natives," explains Daniel.

Whilst making economic sense, this is also particularly relevant on land such as Eringa, which can suffer erosion damage. There are some heavy mudstone and clay soils that can't cope with heavy rainfall and slipping occurs. This factor is the main reason behind the farm's sheep and cow ratio being 80:20 in favour of sheep. To minimise soil and vegetation damage, cattle are kept off the steeper country in winter.

With the new 283ha block in the mix, and mindful of recent dry summers and market and economic conditions, Daniel is aiming to alter the ratio to 70:30. He will introduce greater ability to trade cattle. "We need a bit more flexibility in the system." Daniel and the farm's advisor Phillip Guscott sit down for an in-depth scrutiny of Eringa's management and progress twice a year. In July they set the budget and in January they revise it.

Most of the development budget comes out of the farm income. Basic infrastructure has been either lacking or in need of updating on all the properties, but Daniel points out this has a positive aspect; he's had a blank canvas to work with. "I've been able to put things in place myself, always asking, how am I going to do this to make life easier and thinking about that sustainability factor." A large central laneway has been built and works well says Daniel, minimising labour needs and stock stress.

Daniel and Jo Houston live on the farm with their daughter Kendall (10) and sons Taylor (12) and Lewis (7). The Maslins use the farm's homestead when they visit and for homestay.

JUDGES POINTS

- Very tidy operation, with good attention to detail.
- Excellent relationship between the Owners, Manager and Farm Advisor.
- Manager empowered to get on with farm improvement and has hands on financial control. High levels of enthusiasm.
- Outstanding regrassing programme, improving the easier landforms productivity first.
- Most development is accommodated out of Farm Income.
- Impressive past and recent erosion control plantings.
- Areas of native bush have been retired and new gully retirements established in native tree species.
- Operation is well set for production and profit lift as the development plan matures.



ALAN AND DOT BISSETT
WEE RED BARN

**AKURA CONSERVATION CENTRE LIFESTYLE FARM/
SMALL BLOCK AWARD**

While lifestyle block in size, Alan and Dot Bissett's property on SH2 at Opaki near Masterton provides them with a different life than most owners in this category.

The couple bought the 3.2ha property when they moved from Scotland in 2007 and have since established a thriving business, selling an increasing range of produce from their "Wee Red Barn" roadside shop.

This includes their own harvest and products - wine, berries, gourmet potatoes and other seasonal vegetables, olive oil, eggs and jam. They have also added pigs and lambs into the productive mix, but their highland cow called Andrew lives there strictly for entertainment purposes! Visitors to the shop enjoy the opportunity for a hands-on experience with the animals and the property is becoming a popular spot for wedding photos.

Alan and Dot have extensive experience in "soft fruit" production and management - they met while working on the same property in Scotland. But being in their own business has been another thing altogether and they admit in the last two years they have "had to learn some New Zealand ways".

The award judges were impressed with the way Alan and Dot have developed their business and they commended the Bissett's achievement so far. The judges believed Alan and Dot's hard work and commitment to trying out and establishing new crops and products would lead them very quickly into the main section of these awards.

The property had two hectares of grapes established when the Bissetts purchased it. They have installed drip feed irrigation and the Voen plastic tunnel system for some of the crops. Alan markets the Voen system in his "day job" and Dot works full-time in the business, helped seasonally by several part-time workers.

Nothing is wasted on the property. Waste fruit and scraps are fed to the pigs and unsold fruit is made into jam. The Wee Red Barn is used as a retail outlet for other local growers, and the Bissetts have a stall at the weekly Masterton Farmers Market.



UPCOMING DATES – FIELD DAY

**SUPREME WINNER –
TIM & JO LOE,
"OPORUA"
WEDNESDAY
6TH MAY 2009**



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