

## **Anne Westwood, free-range eggs, Grantville**

I grew up on a plant nursery between the Five Ways and Cranbourne when it was still mostly bush.

Now, I run a happy free-range egg farm at Grantville.

Our farm is on the Bass River. It is 200 acres of which 50 acres is cleared and the rest is still bush. There are two permanent creeks which are buffered from the cleared land by the natural bush.

We purchased the land in the hope of expanding on our existing enterprise – Herefords and horses BUT...

After buying the land we realised that the bush and all the things living in it was important. Among other things it linked the Grantville flora and fauna reserve to the Bass River and it was part of the LAST vegetation on the river.

At that time we could have cleared it, but who would want to be responsible for destroying the last anything?

We were thinking of ways to keep the vegetation and still make a living when one of those “blessings in disguise” happened. A fox killed our farm chooks.

After the horror of disposing of the remains and the ensuing horror of purchasing eggs – I didn’t know the subtleties then – cooking those runny eggs with bright orange yolks, each egg exactly the same - and even worse, my sponge didn’t rise. I festered over the sponge all afternoon until an idea was born...

Over dinner as I plonked the golden syrup dumplings dripping with cream and ice cream on the table I made the opening gambit – “I’ve had a really good idea”.

The spoon stopped in mid-air, the groan almost audible.

As I expanded on the “great idea” the spoon became thoughtful and when it began to dig into the dumplings I knew we were on for at least a trial run.

The idea – a small flock of free-range chooks laying the most amazing eggs in the world – should provide cash flow and would also be ideal for the purposes of cross grazing with cows, sheep and horses.

So the work began.

We made a list and began to work our way through it. The first step was to check with our local council to see which regulations applied, what planning permits we would need and how much it would all cost.

As the chooks were free range they were considered livestock and therefore no change to our farming activities – an as-of-right use to run livestock on a rural property.

Then we had to look for chook housing – we had decided on a mobile shed to be moved around the paddocks and every week checked the *Weekly Times* and the *Trading Post*.

The *Weekly Times* came up trumps with a free-range farm closing down in the Yarra Valley. There were two big sheds and three garden shed-sized sheds – all mobile on skids – with 500 chooks on offer. Unfortunately there were also three Leghorn roosters – but that’s another story.

We got a local house mover to bring the sheds in two trips and we moved the chooks at the same time in utes and trailers.

OK ... we had the chooks, the sheds, feeders, waterers, nest boxes and EGGS! Oh my lord, did we have eggs.

The 500 chooks laid about 450 eggs a day. Every day we collected the eggs – cleaned them, candled them and graded them - and had no one to buy them.

Friends, family and the Salvos did really well.

I cooked all sort of eggie food – pasta, ice-cream, omelettes, meringues, custards, quiche, almond bread – I still do.

We had been trying to get buyers prior to setting up but, of course, no one wants to commit to purchase something that might not happen and purchasers need to be assured of quality and regular deliveries.

Our first regular order was Corinella store – 15 dozen a week. We still sell them 15 dozen a week.

We started going to markets – Philip went to Caribbean Gardens and didn't sell many eggs – he remembers driving home thinking he was coming home to more eggs than there were when he left that morning!

Serendipitously, farmers' markets started, with our first one being Koonwarra quickly followed by Churchill Island and Pakenham.

Orders started coming in. The health food store on Philip Island demanded to know we were accredited prior to purchasing our eggs, Harry's on the Esplanade, who sampled our eggs through a promotion of local produce at the local TAFE eight years ago, resulted in the BEST crème caramel and continuing orders,

Glen Isla House the only five-star hotel on Phillip Island purchased them from the health food store and then contacted us direct.

So now we are seriously selling the eggs.

We decided to spread our marketing – some retail through general stores, health food stores and greengrocers: some bulk on trays, restaurants: some direct through farmers' markets.

We have an "A" customer list we would love to supply but do not, due to our maximum 100km/1 hour away policy.

Along the way we had to provide safe storage of feed – a silo purchased secondhand from NPS on the Mornington Peninsula was delivered and installed. Our second silo was from Ebay, purchased in the Yarra Valley, delivered and installed by NPS.

The farm shed is a story in itself. Our son was at a clearing sale and phoned us to say there was an industrial factory-type shed for auction. He was the losing bidder.

The next day the vendor contacted him and offered to deliver it for a few hundred dollars more. We agreed to that and the shed arrived.

After a lot of welding, oxy-cutting stuff, purchasing and installing the stairs and the mezzanine floor (again from Ebay) and fitting out, the shed was ready.

We had been using a cardboard box with a slit and a light globe to candle the eggs and when we had the opportunity to purchase a secondhand grader at Meerlieu we grabbed it. We recently sold it and upgraded to a "new" secondhand grader.

We had a 24hp Kubota 4WD tractor which just wasn't up to dragging the two big sheds, especially in wet weather. We had to think about purchasing a larger tractor.

After a lot of research we decided on a Chinese tractor as it would not have to do much work, it did not have to be state-of-the-art engineered – with a front end loader.

Since then we have had forks made up for it so we can unload pallets from trucks.

There are moments which change you, when your life moves. One of these was the day when Philip and I were sitting in the front room eating morning tea when a fox sauntered across the lawn with a chook in its mouth.

Out came the *Weekly Times* and I phoned the number in the dogs section and spoke to Rosemarie McCarroll. She had a Maremma which had been trained to work with chooks and I told her I would be in Numurkah at 2.30 or thereabouts that day. I leapt into my trusty Suzuki Sierra and came back at 9 o'clock that night with my first Maremma, Umberta.

We now have eight Maremmas, all different, all wonderful, all completely loyal, no doubt that we and they are on the same journey – protecting the flock against the "others", those incomers and raiders intent on destruction. I have learnt a lot about dogs – and people – from those Maremmas.

There is also a Pyrennean Breton Mastiff who deals with foxes by plonking her not-insignificant 75kg on them, apparently squashing vital organs. We have found several "pressed" foxes stashed under her shed.

To support the dogs we invested in some electrified fencing to contain the chickens to specific areas in their paddocks and to help keep the foxes away.

Preparing the eggs for sale was a steep learning curve. They must be packed to the Australian Shell Egg Code. This means they must be clean, candled and weighed.

Under **Federal Legislation** packages must be labelled according to the regulations. Best before date, identification and contact details, nutrient panel, number of eggs, weight and the latest decision, "Product of Australia". We did want to have "Product of Gippsland" instead, but this was not an option – we could add that, but space is fast running out on the labels.

Under **State Legislation** all chooks in flocks of more than 100 must be vaccinated against several chook illnesses including Mareks, Infectious Bronchitis and Newcastle Disease.

It is well worth a talk with your local government health department. They can give you great advice and have the responsibility for approving your food safety program. The health department are the people who will make inspections and will follow up on any complaints about your product.

Eggs must be kept at a temperature of around 18°C. We purchased first a double-door Coca Cola refrigerator and used that until the opportunity to buy a used cool room arose.

I also did a food handlers' course, even though there is not a specialised egg course (there's an opportunity) and learned some valuable lessons.

My decision to do the course was based on the principle that it's always a good idea to maximise your business opportunities and to minimise your business risks.

For a variety of reasons we decided to join the Free Range Farmers Association.

This has really paid off over the years – the collective wisdom and the annual inspections with constructive feedback from the auditor which promotes constant improvement.

The association is also a way of selling excess eggs to other members who might have a special order to fill, and provides a possible source of eggs at various busy times. As members of the association we are only allowed to buy-in eggs from another member farm to guarantee that the eggs really are free range.

It is difficult to source pullets which have not been beak trimmed or debeaked. Add to that the basic problem that the small numbers we require – three flocks of 200 and two flocks of 350 a year – are just not on the radar for commercial brooding operations which deal with tens of thousands of birds in a single order and it becomes obvious that securing appropriate birds is paramount. There is now a farm near Euroa where they specialise in brooding free-range pullets.

### **What will all this cost?**

It all depends on how you do it. If everything is purchased immediately and it is new then it will cost a bomb. We started small, ideally we should have started smaller, and 100 hens would be easier, with lots of secondhand "stuff".

It is amazing how much there is on the farm which can be used for any diversification – existing machinery, fencing and tools. The home vegetable garden can be a very useful space for providing green fodder for the chooks in the summer and a place to propagate kangaroo apple.

### **Where to from here?**

Using the vegetable garden in this way led to the further diversification into garlic and chillies and now horseradish. We were using chook manure to fertilise the vegie garden and we were producing much more stuff than we could all use.

Most of the garlic available in shops was pretty horrible, and also was imported, generally from China or Mexico.

### **Registered kitchen**

We have also toyed with the option of cooking with excess eggs – meringues, almond bread as well as value adding to the vegies – horseradish cream, aioli, mayonnaise.

As with our eggs we look for niche markets, providing something which is imported now and which can be provided locally – saffron is something I've played with over the years, but our land is too acidic and the climate too temperate for really good-quality stuff.

The list is endless and the market enormous. If you want to get adventurous, look at exporting – we have had enquiries for eggs from a wholesaler providing supermarkets in the UK. It all depends on the market you want and the product you decide to sell.

website: [www.freeranger.com.au](http://www.freeranger.com.au)

blog: <http://freerangereggs.blogspot.com>