

Hamming it up... ...free range style

Michael and Alexandra Hicks know a thing or two about pigs. Owners of a free-range pig farm at Eumungerie, the couple has created a unique opportunity for consumers to buy products locally. With Christmas on our doorstep there won't be a leg of ham on Dubbo's tables with fewer diesel miles or carbon footprint than theirs. **ASTOLD TO** Yvette Aubusson-Foley **PHOTOGRAPHY** Firefly Pictures

How did you get involved with the business of pork?

My and wife and I always wanted to direct market something from the farm and when we first moved to Dubbo there was no one doing pork. We thought why not do something where we don't have any competition to start with.

My wife has always been a fan of pigs since she was young, so we jumped into pigs and away we went.

I've grown up on a farm all my life. I came from a farm at Orange. It was a farm/farm contracting business.

What's been one of the biggest hurdles to setting up your business?

Buying land is one of the big hurdles. Essentially you need to have 40 per cent deposit up front to buy a piece of land that's over 100 acres.

An average farm you could make a living off might be 800 hectares and you're looking at \$2000 a hectare. So 40 per cent of that up front before the bank will fund you. It's very difficult unless you have other assets you can leverage or family that can help you get into that.

That's why we wanted to direct market because we knew it required less land. We always wanted to be in the farming industry so we figured that was a way we could get around that and pigs fitted nicely into that as they require less land compared to sheep and cattle, so we bought 360 acres.

We launched Extraordinary Pork in September last year and we'd had the farm for a year prior to that. We have 14 sows at the moment and 100 grown pigs on the ground.



What breed of pig are you farming?

They're what's called a Berkshire which are renowned for their marbling. They can also be renowned for their levels of fat and they're not as fast growing as the breed called Large White which is what the conventional industry runs with.

Over the past ten years there's been a real pressure for pork to really to lean up its product. The challenge with that is they've gone down the line of a product that is a lot tougher and doesn't have the same amount of tenderness that comes with the marbling products.

How do you learn to be a pig farmer?

Through a lot of trial and error! The pork industry is actually really, very good. I've been involved in a lot of industries all my life, from cropping to sheep to cattle. They're one of the most inclusive industries I've ever been involved in. They're really keen on information sharing, and especially on it's younger members and wanting to be supportive.

To give an example: they have a biannual conference, which is on the Gold Coast and to get producers to go they fund their flights and hotel rooms. It's a pretty good gig. They collect money from levies when the animals go to the abattoir.

When we first started, I think we'd sent two animals to the abattoir, and we said, guys, we've only sent two, we're only just starting, and they told us "we don't care, come anyway".

So, we jumped on a plane and went up there. We were rubbing shoulders with guys who've got 5000 sows in a shed and they'd ask how many pigs we have and we'd say, well...we have four, and they didn't care. They were so helpful with information.

It's an industry that's really focussed on working for its members rather than all the politics and nonsense that sometimes you'll find in other industries.

What does Extraordinary Pork do that's different?

Our pigs move to a different paddock every week, which is quite different to other free-range operations. Because pigs are quite destructive, they'll actually destroy the environment they're in if they're left there. So by moving the pigs to a fresh paddock every week, we're able to really look after our ecosystem and give our paddocks rest, which is along the lines of the theories that have been developed by Allan Savory and Holistic Management.

When you grow the plant and allow it to rest, it gives it the ability to build soil carbon, improve ground cover and increase pro-

duction, rather than a spiral in the opposite direction.

The bonus of that is that it helps to break the disease cycles as well so while they're moving onto fresh pastures continually, for things like worms and other disease issues; it breaks their cycle. I'm not saying you never get them but it certainly has a significant impact in breaking disease cycles.

It takes a lot of our time but then the flip side is I can produce a product where I don't have to keep on pouring stuff out of a bottle onto it; there's two sides to the coin there.

How do the pigs respond to their free-range environment?

Dr. Temple Grandin uses the word "excitable". I only really see it when I take pigs to the abattoir. When pigs are under stress, or stirred up, they will just squeal or make a really loud noise. They recommend you wear earmuffs in a lot of piggeries because the noise is so loud.

According to Temple Grandin, in some of these sheds where their environment is so barren, there's really nothing going on there other than a pen and few other pigs, they become really hypersensitive to stimuli like a door slamming.

Our pigs that are moving to a fresh paddock every week where they get to see new bugs, and grass and dig fresh holes and do



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all sorts of other weird fun stuff and run around – they're not in a tight little pen – they're far quieter.

We're also smaller too and it allows us to be in close contact with our pigs. We don't use farrowing sheds or farrowing crates. We have little buildings that are used and rotate the pigs around to farrow the pigs down but it's really important to me that the pigs are super quiet, so if I need to get in there and help them if they're having problems while they're farrowing, I can. (With) most of our sows you can walk in and give them a pat on the back and they're fine with that.

How have you expanded your operation?

We've just finished building our own butchering facility. We've put a cool room in and built it according to food safety standards. We're just waiting on our audit. We've been storing all our meat here on farm for a year, which we have a licence to do so now we're taking it the next step.

It's quite expensive – the paddock to plate process – and because it's free range and it consumes a bit more of my time as it's labour intensive, it slows down how much pork I can actually grow.

Over the course of the past year I've been considering where I can cut costs to make Extraordinary Pork more profitable. The butchering is taking up 40 per cent of my costs, so it was one of the obvious costs so I hope to be able to cut that cost in half.

I have some qualified butchers lined up who will come out and help.
Why is it so hard to buy bacon made in Australia?

Seventy per cent of bacon and ham in Australia is imported. It is just unbelievable, and it's all coming primarily from Canada and Denmark. Denmark has more pigs than people; they're a huge pork production country. Australians eat barely any pork compared with Europe.

Those countries are importing an enormous amount of pork. It's kind of what killed the industry here ten or 15 years ago, maybe more.

Years ago, every second farmer along my road had pigs. Then they fell out of favour because they struggled to get

Michael and Alexandra Hicks, Extraordinary Pork, Eumungerie



their pigs to be profitable. It's only in the past five years that the industry's been able to scrape itself out of a hole. There are a lot of guys that went big and spend a lot of money on sheds and infrastructure to just tick along. For a long time there, the sale price was the same as the cost of production and that was never sustainable.

What's been the feedback from consumers about your product?

It's interesting. We have a lot more support for being local than we expected. Animal welfare and producing a good quality clean product was really high on our priority list but it's been interesting to see that those things were important to people but being local was most important. I find that really fascinating.

We've received pressure because we're an expensive product but I can't possibly do it any cheaper because it just takes so much time.

I still think we're cheap. A pork chop from us is \$22 a kilo. Out of a supermarket, it's roughly \$19.20. So we're pretty close. Our bacon is \$25 a kilo, which I don't think is that expensive.

Christmas is the leg ham season; what's going on in the industry at this time of year?

Everyone in the pork industry is saving back legs right from January all the way through the year, then selling them out at Christmas. There's enough local pork that local hams can generally supply the local market.

Our hams are a heck of a lot more expensive than the supermarket. I don't know what they're doing. They're selling hams at \$7 a kilo, they're Australian hams.

They've stored hams for an entire year and are then selling them out for \$7 – why would you do that? You've paid interest on that pork that's sitting in a freezer for 10 months. To me

it seems like the milk game: "Let's sell it out at \$1 a litre..."

I know some of the big guys are trying to match them otherwise they can't compete. When you start looking at how many hams are floating around, I know some of the butchers in town are doing close to 2000 hams a year, all in the last two months before Christmas and then there are others doing 400, 500; there could be 5000 hams that are cured in Dubbo.

For us at \$30 a kilo we're three times the price but that leg has been ten months in production just in growing and then stored in a freezer for however long. Everything else we do during the year helps us along but the hams are where we actually make some profit at the end.

I understand people are budget conscious but that's the price of buying local and free range. I believe they taste better too.