

The greatest gift of all – a happy community life

Karen Trebilcock

Tim and Lorraine Johnson, winners of the Otago sharemilker/equity farmer of the year award, say it is the community around them that has smoothed their way into their new lives as sharemilkers.

“We can’t praise our community enough, they have made the transition so easy,” Lorraine said.

And it has been quite a transition. Only a few years ago the Johnsons, with their two children Molly, now 11, and Jacob, now 9, were running their own successful housewares and gift shop in Wellington.

Today they 50-50 sharemilk 352 cows for Dairy Holdings near Tapanui.

But dairying wasn’t completely new to the couple. Tim’s parents had been sharemilkers in the 1960s and he used to stay on friends’ farms in the holidays. During a stint at Telford, he met Lorraine who was living in Balclutha after her family had moved into town after sheep farming.

“I’d always really, really enjoyed farming but I never had that magical break to get into it when I was younger,” Tim said.

After eight years of retailing in Wellington they realised they had the equity to do it and the business knowledge to be successful at it.

They started out in 2007 with a second-in-charge position that quickly led to a managing job and then to Tapanui and sharemilking for the 2009/10 season.

They are there for the next season too, but are looking for opportunities to sharemilk bigger numbers and their bank has suggested they enter into an equity partnership as well.

“We want to stay in this area if we can, but we will go anywhere.”

In their 40s, they are both aware the clock is ticking for them to build their business and said the Dairy Industry Awards had opened their eyes to many opportunities. They had heard about the competition at a Christmas party in 2009 and Tim had come away “buzzing” before finding out he had missed the cut off. Last spring, they entered on time and “it’s just been go-go-go ever since”.

Tim said sharemilking for Dairy Holdings was a little different to milking on a family-owned farm. The company owns 58 dairy farms in the South Island and more than 20 grazing blocks.

“They let us get on with the job really, as long as we stick to the budget. They have



Tim and Lorraine Johnson – from gift shop to dairy.

very good policies and procedures which we have to follow when it comes to things like health and safety and HR.”

The Johnsons employ one part-time staff member and one full-timer, Filipino Bonnie Omadle who, after working for them for three years, is moving on to “bigger things” in the dairy industry in New Zealand.

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“He’s been great. We’re very sad to see him go,” Lorraine said.

The herd is mostly Friesian but is slowly being changed to crossbred using CRV AmBreed straws. “Any big Friesians we put a Jersey over and vice versa. We get a good cross that way and some hybrid vigour.” AB was only for four weeks last year, because of the adverse weather conditions, but they hope to extend that to eight weeks this mating period.

The breeding worth (BW) is 52. “Because we had to buy the whole herd when we started, as we hadn’t had the chance to rear our own calves like most people do as lower-order sharemilkers, we had to buy bits of herds,” Tim said. “A lot of them were older cows and budget cows, so something we want to do in the future is

improve the BW.”

Production last year was 137,000kg milksolids (MS) off the 110ha milking platform and they had hoped to do about the same this season but the spring weather has changed that and 125,000kg MS looks more realistic. After a series of southerly storms in early April, the herd has been put on 16-hour milkings to try to build body condition before winter.

Fertiliser is applied according to Dairy Holding’s nutrient management plan, with 365kg/ha of 10 percent potash superphosphate going on the non-effluent areas of the farm this year and 300kg of straight on the effluent areas. All up, 250 units of nitrogen (N) was available to be used.

Farm working expenses last year were \$2.24/kg MS, high mainly because of the start-up costs of going sharemilking “without the time beforehand to accumulate bits and pieces”. This year, the increasing costs of fuel and electricity and a larger number of youngstock grazing off and the purchase of 87t of grass silage have driven it higher, to around \$2.50/kg.

Another 50t of silage and 200 bales of baleage has been made on farm.

Time away usually involves a boat, a lake and water skis, although Tim and Lorraine also spend a few hours each week on the sides of netball courts and rugby or cricket fields cheering their kids on.

“We do run a constant taxi service it seems with the kids. Last year we clocked up 45,000km in the car,” Lorraine said. Molly and Jacob had taken time to adjust from city living to the country life, but she said they loved it now and wouldn’t go back.

The Johnsons also won the DairyNZ human resources award and the Westpac business performance award.

Second was Taieri 50-50 sharemilkers Cameron and Anna Edgcombe, who also won the Ecolab farm dairy hygiene award and the LIC recording and productivity award.

Sharemilkers Rob and Jayne Neeley of Taieri were given the Ravensdown pasture performance award. Peter Johnstone, who 50-50 sharemilks at Tapanui, picked up the Clutha Vets animal husbandry award and the Meridian Energy farm environment award, while equity managers Simon and Hillary Vallely of Waipahi took the Federated Farmers leadership award and the Honda farm safety and health award.