On-Farm Butchering, Albany WA

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Barb and Mike Shipley, Albany, Western Australia

Mike and Barb Shipley run cattle and sheep on two farms totalling 540 acres (216 hectares) near Albany, Western Australia. The cooler south west of Western Australia is ideally suited to grazing, with rainfall in most months, and fertile, loamy soils. Their land is located on what is known locally as the dairy flats. It can get wet in winter but is good in summer, and the kikuyu component of their pasture keeps growing and providing green feed when other grasses dry off.

Mike and Barb came late to farming, their first farm enterprise being an organic stone fruit orchard they owned near Perth, managed by their son and daughter in law, on which Mike worked 4 days a week. Eventually they "retired", returning to Albany where they both spent their youth. After four months of doing nothing, Mike became bored and they bought the first property, the second following two years ago.

When they bought the first property and were considering how to manage it, son Justin (who had read widely on the subject) argued that they should adopt Biodynamic methods and be proactive in developing soil health, rather than just being organic by neglect or simply replacing water soluble artificial fertilizers with organic alternatives. They decided to approach the Bio-Dynamic Agricultural Association of Australia, and work towards Demeter Biodynamic certification, feeling that this was the most widely respected development of Biodynamics in Australia. Justin contacted Alex Podolinsky, who recommended some local BD producers to visit. They were helped by Ray Oversby, Bob McIntosh and a few others, bought a stirring machine and sprayer for applying prepared 500[1], and a 500 storage box, and got started. Biodynamics has met all their expectations. The soil dramatically changed over time, becoming noticeably more alive and forgiving, developing a more crumbly structure and darkening in colour. The first farm is now fully Demeter certified, while the second, purchased two years ago, is certified Demeter "in-conversion". No fertilisers are

[1] The soil biology activator, 500, with the six BD compost preparations incorporated. See page 2.

used on either property, only the soil biology activator, prepared 500. Since buying the second farm, they have upgraded to a twin barrel stirring machine, which stirs enough 500 for 40 acres (16 ha) at a time. When they had a full time worker, they were able to spray the whole farm twice a year, but since he moved on they spray once a year, generally in autumn, starting after the autumn break around late March. If the winter is mild, they can continue applying 500 into June.

Mike and Barb produced Biodynamic free range eggs from 550 hens for some years, alongside their cattle and sheep, but last year decided to simplify and just focus on meat production.

They run Wiltshire Horn sheep, chosen for their self-shedding wool (shed in Spring) which means they don't need shearing. This breed is a slow grower, and the lambs can take 15-16 months to reach killing age, but, when ready, have beautiful flavour and tenderness. They used to run the cattle and sheep together but playful steers accidentally killed a few lambs so now the sheep follow the cattle in the pasture rotation. In the near future they intend phasing out of sheep altogether and concentrating on the cattle.

Wiltshire Horn sheep, wool shedding underway. Alpaca stands guard.

Mike and Barb run Angus cattle and are still building herd numbers, only having 80 cows and about 40 young cattle at present. Thirty of the cows are autumn calvers, while the rest are spring calvers.

Mike believes it is better to focus on meat produced per hectare rather than meat produced per animal, and that more meat can be produced overall by using smaller frame score cows. He aims to reduce the size of the breeders over time by the use of Angus Lowline bulls – this will reduce the current breeder frame score of 5 or 6 to an ideal of around 3. As the cattle are only grass fed and grass finished, they can take 20-30 months to reach the ideal size for slaughter. At that age there is also better marbling and better quality meat overall.

Under Biodynamic management, animal health has been excellent. Mike has never drenched a cow, and has only had to drench the occasional ewe at the worst time of year feed-wise, with apple cider vinegar, garlic and a little cod liver oil.

Butcher Shop

In order to maximise their returns, Mike and Barb built a butcher shop, with freezer, coolroom and packing room on the first farm. Although they only have single phase power on the farm, they were strongly advised to incorporate a single phase to three phase power

Meat mincer

Band saw

converter in the electrical set-up, so they could install some three phase machines, which would last a lot longer than the single phase equivalents. An array of solar panels on the roof provides all the required power on a sunny day.

They employ a butcher two days a week, an assistant who will soon commence a butchering apprenticeship on the farm, and a packer. Mike takes animals to the abattoir at Bunbury on a Monday, they are killed first thing Tuesday morning, and, because they operate a certified, health inspected butcher shop, the abattoir delivers the carcases back to them (on the Thursday).

All the meat they produce is sold locally. Mike and Barb have a large refrigerated meat trailer with glass doors

Butcher's apprentice, Harpo, cryovaccing mince meat

Meat packer, Rosalie

which they take to 3 markets a week in Albany – Wednesday afternoon, Saturday morning and Sunday 10am -1pm at the Oyster Harvest Store - and one market a week at the Denmark Steiner School. They sell a lot of mince to the main bakery in Albany for use in their organic burgers, lamb shoulders, mince, diced lamb and other cuts to a local café, and also sell wholesale to Denmark Organics. They make their own Biodynamic preservative-free, gluten-free and soy-free sausages with natural casings which, cryovacced, keep for 20 days without freezing.

Sales have grown steadily and Mike and Barb now buy in some Biodynamic and Organic certified meat (including pork) from the WA Organic Meat Cooperative to supplement their own production.

Farming is a seven day a week commitment. As Mike says, they basically don't have a life outside the farm (Barb is also busy helping people as a "health coach"). Simplifying their farming operation to cattle-only will help. Residents of the south west of Western Australia are fortunate to have access to such health giving, grass-fed Biodynamic (and organic) meat, thanks to the dedication of Mike and Barb Shipley.

Mike with his market meat trailer

Grass-fed Meat

Red meats in general are an excellent source of complete protein, containing all the essential amino acids. It also contains Vitamins A, B_6, B_{12}, D, E, K, minerals iron, zinc, calcium, magnesium and selenium and fats that are an important source of energy, and facilitate the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K.

Grass fed meats contain much higher levels of essential nutrients than grain fed meats: Vitamin E (up to 4X), Omega 3 fats (up to 5X), 3-5 times as much conjugated linoleic acid and higher levels of B_1, B_2, K, calcium, magnesium and selenium. Grass fed meats also have higher levels of cancer fighting antioxidants glutathione and superoxide dismutase, and lower levels of trans fats and specific saturated fats linked with heart disease (palmitic and myristic). **Grain fed meats** have a much higher rate of contamination with dangerous bacteria such as E-coli and staphylococcus aureus. Half of those bacteria are resistant to three classes of antibiotics. **Organic grass fed meats** have twice the conjugated linoleic acid levels of conventional grass fed meats and four times as much selenium. Selenium is a **critical nutrient for fertility** and also reduces the incidence of depression and anxiety.