



Deer Industry News

Looking back

REVISITED

The Peacock's farm near
Murchison

CELEBRATED

A decade of deer dairying

REVIEWED

European venison market
highlights



MAY 13TH - WELCOME DINNER

TSS Earnslaw boat ride out to Walter Peak where guests will enjoy a gourmet buffet dinner



 **Deer Industry**
New Zealand

MAY 15TH - FEILD DAY

Location TBC



MAY 14TH - CONFERENCE

Programme TBC

INDUSTRY AWARDS DINNER

Deer Industry Award

NZDFA Matuschka Award

Biannual Environmental Awards

MSD/Allflex Deer Industry Photo Competition

DEER INDUSTRY CONFERENCE

Millennium Hotel, Queenstown

Registrations open early 2025... deernz.org/home/events/deer-industry-conference-2025

Deer Industry News

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF DEER INDUSTRY
NEW ZEALAND AND THE NEW ZEALAND
DEER FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

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Cover photo: Tony Pidgeon - On the move

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2024 in the rearview – what next for the deer industry?

What a year! If I looked back a year to this time in 2023, I wouldn't have picked where I sit today. A lot happened in 2024; some of it exciting, some of it frustrating, but ultimately, I am encouraged by where we as an industry are today and am hugely excited about the future.



We are approaching a period of change or, more likely, we are in it already. You can see it the world over. But change is a good thing, so we should embrace it and use it to our advantage.

DINZ is hearing anecdotal evidence of farmers inquiring about getting into deer. While anecdotal, there is a sense of momentum out there, and we are currently firming this information up through our networks. The strategic directions we have taken since Covid, I believe, stand us in good stead for the future.

Of course, our key priority for this year was on restoring our market access pathway for frozen velvet to China. This was huge, a mammoth task at record speeds (in trade access terms). Sadly, current prices do not reflect the effort that has gone into this, as commodity traders (that profit from instability) have capitalised on the uncertainty.

Looking at next year, it'll be about building the foundations for a new era for the deer industry based on value. All about value. Value, value, value: for our products; for our farmers, processors and exporters; and for our country.

With market access to China for New Zealand frozen velvet restored, we're set up for a push into more contemporary health products in China. Exciting things are happening in South Korea with health functional foods. I'm also looking forward to the next report on the North American Retail Accelerator (NARA) project. NARA is such an exciting project, one which will deliver results for our venison producers. And I'm eager to investigate where we can extract even more value, with a keen eye on co-products as an area to explore.

These directions are all part of our strategy refresh, our roadmap into this new era to deliver improved and sustainable value to our industry.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the support of many as I've stepped into the CEO role. There are plenty of new faces or faces in new places, myself included. Paddy as chair, I'm just so stoked to have him leading our industry. The board, who have all been generous with their time and expertise. Mark and the rest of the NZDFA executive committee for all they do with the DFA. And the DINZ team, with a number of changes over the past year or so, now settling into a rhythm.

2025 is going to be a good year, I can feel it. We must continue to dream bigger and put into action tangible plans to realise those dreams. What's next for the deer industry? What's the next market for venison? How can velvet break out of its two traditional markets, and how can we help it get there? What new technologies can we use to boost on-farm performance, productivity and profitability? Where to next for co-products?

We sit on the edge of a new era; an era of change. Changing markets and market expectations, changing climate and weather, changing technologies, changing farming systems and practices. The deer industry has always seen change ahead of time and embraced it, choosing innovative thinking over the status quo. It is this attitude that will help us to thrive in this new era.

Merry Christmas and a fantastic holiday season to you all. Hope to see as many of you as I can at next year's conference in Queenstown! ■

Rhys Griffiths, DINZ CEO

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The wrap

Darryl Carr, one of the crowd at the Southland DFA field day at Merrivale Deer (see page 26) with a Kiwi Econet wrapped bale of red clover balage. The eco-friendly bale wrap was developed by Southland deer farmer and commercial diver Grant Lightfoot, who also runs a logging truck operation. He exhibited Kiwi Econet at the Waimumu Southern Field Days and has since progressed an overseas manufacturing agreement.



It's taken a lot of work, money and overseas trips to finalise the design, he says. The first container load of the bale net is expected in early January for distribution directly to farmers or distributors. The product costs about the same, or slightly more than plastic wrap. For more information ph 027 451 1144.

Open Day



Pāmu is opening the farm gates of three Te Anau Basin deer farms on Wednesday 29 January. The deer farms – Haycocks, Mararoa, and Lynmore – will showcase their integrated systems providing insight into innovative practices, sustainable farming systems and explaining the critical role deer play in Pāmu's business and the local economy. The event starts at midday at Haycock Station, 1236 Mavora Lakes Road. Lunch is included and a 4WD will be needed for the farm tour. Registration is essential. Go to: TeAnaudeer.eventbrite.co.nz to register.

Cheers to deer

Deer milk has been described as the caviar of the dairy world because of its unique high value nutritional properties. Science-backed research has proved that deer milk is low in lactose, has more than twice the amount of protein than cows' milk, and contains lactoferrin, a protein with antiviral, antibacterial and antioxidant properties. Taste-test for yourself the super creamy goodness of



Pāmu's Deer Milk full cream milk powder. To find out more and buy go to: pamumilk.com/deer-milk. Read more about the deer dairying journey to date on page 14.

Naked attraction



Massey University vet students bared (almost) all in the Barely There 2025 calendar. For third-year students, the calendar project is an annual tradition and this year about 20 students in various states of undress were photographed in different rural vistas and settings. Supported by principal sponsor FarmIQ, the intention of the calendar is to have a bit of fun and spread positivity within rural and veterinary communities. Some of the proceeds from sales will be donated to the Rural Support Trust. The calendars, \$25 each, are the perfect stocking filler, and are available at: www.vet-naked-calendar-2025.com/#buy-calendar-section

Scholars

Ella Rae-Wood and Toby Beale are the inaugural recipients of the New Zealand Veterinary Association Deer Branch student scholarships. The two third year students will each receive \$1500 to assist them with the cost of practical placements at a vet clinic with deer clientele during their fourth or fifth year of study. In addition to financial support, the intention of the scholarship is to spark and develop the recipient's interest and knowledge of deer. Eight students applied this year, and Deer Branch members are helping those who missed out find deer vet experience placements. "We want more graduates coming out of vet school with an interest in working with deer farmers," Deer Branch president Camille Flack says. "That means getting the knowledge and experience, and the scholarships are a good start but vet clinics and farmers have to engage positively and encourage graduates as well."



Spot check

'Don't let a spot become a full stop' was the message Melanoma New Zealand shared with rural New Zealanders in 2021 and it's worth repeating now. NZ has the highest incidence rate of melanoma in the world. More than 4000 are diagnosed with

melanoma, and around 300 people die from it each year – that’s more than the number of people who die in road accidents. Men aged 50 years and older – the mainstay of rural NZ – are most at risk of melanoma. The good news is that melanoma is almost always preventable if the right checks and balances are in place. Melanoma NZ encourages people to get a regular spot check and to develop sun smart habits, including the 5S rule: slip into a long-sleeved shirt with a collar; slop on broad-spectrum sunscreen; slap on a broad-brimmed hat; seek shade between 10am and 4pm; and slide on some close-fitting polarised sunglasses.



Good work Jordan

Congrats to PhD student/technician Jordan Clarke, the 2024 winner of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production Young Members Award for her paper and presentation ‘Exploration of the New Zealand Deer Rumen Microbiome.’ DINZ has contributed \$120,000 towards the project in which Clarke will use a new microbial database to explore the microbes that are present in the rumen and compare these with sheep and cattle to determine whether genomic control of deer microbiome (microbial communities) is heritable.



Catchment collective



Aotearoa New Zealand
**CATCHMENT
COMMUNITIES**

Aotearoa New Zealand Catchment Communities is up and running. ANZCC is the collective voice of catchment groups throughout the country, many of whom include deer farmers.

ANZCC has been more than a year in the making and inaugural chair, North Canterbury sheep and beef farmer Ben Ensor, says the overriding mission of the umbrella group is to advocate on behalf of catchment groups and work on securing consistent government and non-government funding to provide certainty to the collective’s 250 groups covering approximately 6 million hectares throughout the country. For more on catchment group activities see page 33.

Getting Through

A new book and website Getting Through (farmstrong.co.nz) covers what it takes to recover from extreme weather events, sharing Hawke’s Bay farmer experiences of 2023’s severe weather. Deer farmer Harry Gaddum features in the book and said at a broad level, being connected with the deer industry was a big help.



“Support just piled in from the industry. They were sending fences up from the South Island to help. We got streams of emails. You could take some comfort from that. I hope all deer farmers in Hawke’s Bay felt that because we certainly did. It was amazing to be part of that.” ■

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Double Agent

PGG Wrightson's Steve Annan has the dual role of national stud coordinator and North Island deer and velvet coordinator. They're all-consuming and full-on roles during peak season mid-October until mid-January when covers the length of the country.

You started with PGGW in 2021 as the North Island deer and velvet coordinator but your connections with deer and the stock & station industry started long before that?

Yes, I grew up on my grandfather's Te Rapa dairy farm and later we added deer to the farming model. My father Rob was also a livestock agent. I got to travel with him, meeting and getting to know a lot about deer sales and velvet pools as well as meeting many of the first generation deer farmers during the 1980s. He had lots of stories from that era which stuck with me and fueled my enthusiasm for deer.

Tell me about your velvet coordinator role.

I coordinate and keep in touch with the PGGW velvet agents and the PGGW retail collection points throughout the North Island. I also do my fair share of velvet collection, mainly from the larger-scale producers. Once the North Island velvet is collected, it's transported and graded in Christchurch.

How did the early season uncertainty about frozen velvet access to China impact on your clients?

They were concerned but mostly understood the situation and supported our business. PGGW have intergenerational relationships with families so have a real understanding of their farming businesses, which helps during uncertain and tough times.

You are coordinating the national stud sales calendar for the first time this year. What has that involved?

I've always done the stud sales circuit so it's not completely new to me. I understand what it takes to run a successful auction. What's different this year is that I've been working directly with stud masters, helping them as needed with advertising and marketing.

I started planning for the actual sale days in June, coordinating and locking in the sale dates, auctioneers and agents so that everything is ready to go on the day. The stud sale season starts on 11 December and finishes in the South Island in mid-January.

Any predictions on how the stud selling season will go?

The stud sales are based predominantly on three-year-old animals and from what I've viewed around the countryside there are some very impressive stags and elk/wapiti bulls being put up for auction and that's a big positive. There are challenges on the venison side given capital stock numbers, but we've had a stable venison schedule over the last year, and there's interest from some sheep and beef farmers with deer infrastructure who are considering diversification into venison. The trophy side suffered during Covid, but the overseas hunters and demand has come back, which is another positive. It's interesting to see how the trophy market

has evolved in recent years and created a new income category for farmers.

In your pre-PGGW career you had experience in sales and marketing, telecommunications, engineering and transport. How have those roles helped you in your current roles?

The marketing, communication and selling skills I developed in those roles have been great and relevant skills in what I now do. My previous roles also taught me the importance of viewing things from a client perspective.

What other roles have you taken on beyond your job description?

I try to encourage young agents into our industry and enjoyed the opportunity to take some along to this year's Next Generation event. PGGW has always had a strong presence in the industry and is proactive in supporting events such as the Next Generation and velvet competitions, which encourage and promote excellence.

Where do you live and what are your after-hours interests?

I live on a farm in Maraekakaho, west of Hastings, which keeps my wife and I busy in our off time. When I get the time, I like waterskiing.

What will Christmas Day look like given it's in the middle of the busy stud sales season?

Christmas day will be a chance to recharge my batteries and have a quiet day on the farm with my family. ■



ELK WAPITI SOCIETY NZ

The 2025 Velvet and Hard Antler Competition is to be held in Cromwell on the 7th and 8th of February.



"Sunset Bull" by Tony Pidgeon.

Elk Wapiti category winner, 2024 MSD/Allflex Deer Industry photo competition. Entries for the 2025 competition are opening early 2025.

Join our December Zoom discussion on buying a sire at the January 2025 sire sales, catalogues and more...



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- Zoom Panel Discussion Group, join industry experts and learn all things Elk Wapiti. So far, we have had experts talk about Practicalities of using Elk Wapiti Bulls in a breeding operation, Markets, Health and Productivity. Dates and times for upcoming events will be on the industry websites. Get in contact if you want to know more.
- In 2026 it will be 40 years since the Elk Wapiti Society Inaugural AGM, was held in Winton. If anyone has any information about the early days, please get in contact via our email elkwapitinz@gmail.com



www.elkwapitisociety.co.nz

MyOSPRI upgrade delayed

OSPRI has had to back-track on promises that MyOSPRI glitches around the recording and registering of deer NAIT tags would be fixed by the end of 2024.

At the 2023 Deer Farmers Association Branch Chairs meeting some farmers vented frustration about the failure of MyOSPRI to record and register the scanned NAIT tags of some animals. The system failure, acknowledged by OSPRI's Clifton King, had left farmers facing hefty fines. OSPRI was "prioritising NAIT in MyOSPRI to address many of the issues," he said, and invited feedback from DINZ and farmers to help rank the issues that needed addressing.

However, since then an OSPRI board-initiated independent review in February revealed that the multi-million dollar upgrade project to simplify data inputting for farmers and improve overall efficiency had failed. The building of the new interface stopped in July after the review confirmed the technology programme was not fit-for-purpose and would be unnecessarily costly to run, maintain, or modify.

OSPRI Stakeholder Council NZDFA representative Craig North says the findings are obviously disappointing.

"We've lost three years of work, but a new user-friendly system will be built, and by the end of this year we'll know how long it will take," he says.

North has viewed a prototype of the improved interface and was confident it would deliver what was needed. In the meantime, he recommends that farmers wand scan everything onto trucks.

"Unfortunately, it's the only way to avoid the possibility of unregistered tags."

North took on the stakeholder representative role in December 2023 because of his familiarity with OSPRI and the NAIT system. He is pushing to get definitive figures on the extent and cost to deer farmers of non-registered NAIT tags.

"I want to get an understanding of how many animals with unregistered tags are ending up at the works, so I know how big the problem is. So far, I've only had feedback from six deer farmers."

Once the extent of the problem is known, the next step is to find out if unregistered tags identified at processors are automatically assigned back to the animal's farm of origin.

"If that's the case for an animal on a one-way movement to the works, the question to ask MPI is 'Where is the risk of a disease outbreak'? Yes, it's law to have the tags registered but there needs to be some common sense and a bit of give and take."

He believes that the non-registration of tag numbers is mostly a people rather than systems error.

"There's nothing fundamentally wrong with the system. It's more that it's not user friendly."

However, he adds that there are some issues registering animals using the Gallagher and Tru-Test portals to NAIT, when updating a replacement tag that has a visual tag attached to it.

"It's also important to note that you can only register 250 tags at a time through the NAIT website, or 500 if using an upload file."

Farmers who are having tag registration issues should contact one of OSPRI's regional partner support team, he says.

"I know from experience they are awesome to deal with." ■

Measuring up

Calipers, masking and measuring tapes were essential kit at the Elk & Wapiti Society – organised Safari Club International (SCI) certification course at Cromwell on 1 October.



HANDS ON: (L TO R) Chris McIntyre, Andy Elder and Chris McCarthy consider the measuring of a trophy head.

MASTER: Terry Pierson is the southern hemisphere's only official master measurer.

Twenty people – a mix of deer farmers, trophy hunters, taxidermists and outfitters – attended the day to gain or refresh the SCI qualification for the measuring and scoring of trophy heads, including tahr, chamois, fallow, red deer and wapiti.

"You name it, and they can score it," tutor and SCI official master measurer Terry Pierson said.

Pierson, the only master measurer in the southern hemisphere, with back-up from in-training measuring tutor Katie Dugan, explained and demonstrated the basics of measuring various horned and antler beasts before zoning in on deer trophy antler. Participants got plenty of opportunity to apply measuring and scoring skills. They also completed an open-book exam to retain/gain certification.

Once a trophy head is scored by a qualified SCI measurer, it's entered in the official record book, which has about half-a-million entries, ranging from wildebeest and rhino to turkey and goat.

"It's the largest (trophy) record book in the world and probably the most esteemed," Pierson said.

SCI has about 50,000 members worldwide spread across 180 chapters. The New Zealand chapter is one of the smallest with about 250 members. ■

Taking a count

According to Statistics New Zealand, there were 742,000 farmed deer in New Zealand at June 2023, down seven percent from 2022.

But what's happened since then? Have numbers dipped further, bottomed out or increased?

These are some of the questions that DINZ is attempting to answer as part of their work to get better data on the industry. A nationwide survey distributed to DFA branches and Advance Parties is part of this work focusing on animal numbers and land used for deer farming. In addition, a recent survey across the country is looking to capture information from 150 farmers, proportional to the number and geographical spread of farmed deer throughout the country.

The survey is not just a number gathering exercise, DINZ Capability Manager John Ladley says.

"We're interested in developing a broader picture of the farmed deer herd. There's a lot of anecdotal information but we haven't attempted to validate this and need to start somewhere," he says.

The exercise follows a request from the DINZ board who are keen to know the status of the breeding hind herd. An accurate assessment of hind numbers is a starting point but drilling down into the class categories and age cohorts will provide valuable information to processors and marketers on how to structure and manage their businesses for the future.

"We know for example that the farming focus has been shifting towards velvet but where are those stags farmed and what age group do they fall into? We want to know that information because it will impact venison eventually in both the processing and end markets space."

The survey includes questions to gauge farmer confidence, such as whether or not they are planning to upsize, maintain or downsize their farming operations, DINZ science and policy manager Emil Murphy says.

"This broader information will give us insight into the present and future look of the industry so we can adapt and support science and R&D accordingly."

He hoped that the raw survey data would be on hand by the end of November. ■

Young Deer Farmer of the Year

Eddie Millichamp is the world's first Young Deer Farmer of the Year. He was one of five finalists and claimed the top prize after the second stage of the competition at the SCNO velvet competition.



WINNER: Eddie Millichamp (centre) with competition organisers Danette McKeown and Mark Tapley.

The finalists had to choose the top three heads of the three-year-old velvet category (extra points were awarded if they picked correctly) and were then put to the test in a 48-question buzzer round of deer and farming-related questions.

Millichamp, a Lincoln University Bachelor of Agriculture student, says he was nervous heading into the final but enjoyed the experience. A member of the Lincoln University Young Farmers club, he was raised on a small-scale deer farm and has deer farming experience that he plans to pursue after completing his degree next year.

Runner up was Quinten Rowe (Mt Possession); third place, Henry Wilson (Peel Forest Estate); and fourth Charlie Westagarth (Waimate).

Read all about the competition (page 22). ■



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Hands-on

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

The McIntyres gave Taiwanese scientists Hsiao-Mei Liang (Mei) and Chia-Te Chu (Joey) a close up experience of deer farming in New Zealand. The McIntyres - Pete, Sharon and son Chris – hosted the visiting scientists at their Benio deer farm near Gore and provided an engaging high-level overview of their velvet, trophy and deer milking system.

Chu and Liang were inspired to discover more about New Zealand's deer genetics programmes and recording after attending the World Deer Congress in 2020. Chu contacted Jamie Ward, organiser of the planned 2026 Deer Congress, who coordinated the two week visit in October.

New Zealand is a “pioneer in applying genomic selection”, Chu said.

“New Zealand is a key player in advancing livestock genetic improvement and makes significant contributions to global animal breeding and agricultural sustainability.”

Most of Chu's research was genomic and genetic selection-related for poultry and pigs but deer were also an interest area. He was keen to discover more about our science-based livestock breeding strategies, and how whole genome sequencing technology might be applied in Taiwan's poultry and swine industries.

“(New Zealand) is a pioneer in applying genomic selection.”

Lang is an assistant researcher at the Ministry of Agriculture's Taiwan Livestock Research Institute and regularly visits deer farmers to advise and assist them. Her research focus includes RFID tagging, and she was interested in our NAIT and Veltrak tracing systems.

Taiwan's deer farming is a small velvet-based \$US20million industry based around an estimated 12,000 deer on 400 – 500 farms. The deer were mostly Formosa Samber, one of the few breeds to withstand Taiwan's humid conditions. It is an intensive and expensive business because the deer were indoor pen-raised on imported silage and lucerne, Chu said.

The velvet industry was centralised and regulated, with the dried and powdered velvet product sold to South Korea. ■



THUMBS UP: Joey Chu, Jamie Ward and Mei Lang.



CLOSE UP: Mei Lang and Joey Chu in the thick of the McIntyre's stags with Jamie Ward (left) and Pete and Chris McIntyre (right). The stags, hand-reared as part of the McIntyre's deer dairy system, are comfortable and respectful among people.



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Effen x Rocky

Viewing 3.30pm

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Ultra

Dutton

30 2yr Velvet Stags



Pink 373 – 9.3kg @ 3yrs
Effen x Rocky

Eddie Brock 027 6076822

Elliot Brock 027 2776733

Facebook: Brock Deer

Stag sale calendar 2025

Date	Time	Client	Location (South/North island)
Wednesday, 8 January 2025	12:00 PM	Foveran Deer Park	Kurow, SI
Wednesday, 8 January 2025	6:00 PM	Ardleigh Deer	Geraldine, SI
Thursday, 9 January 2025	10:30 AM	Raincliff Station, Wapiti	Pleasant Point, SI
Thursday, 9 January 2025	2:30 PM	Edendale Deer	Mt Somers / Ashburton, SI
Thursday, 9 January 2025	6:30 PM	Rothestay Deer	Methven, SI
Friday, 10 January 2025	1:00 PM	Peel Forest Estate	Peel Forest, SI
Friday, 10 January 2025	4:30 PM	Deer Genetics NZ Deer Sale	Geraldine, SI
Saturday, 11 January 2025	12:00 PM	Black Forest Park	Outram, SI
Saturday, 11 January 2025	5:00 PM	Brock Deer	Gore, SI
Sunday, 12 January 2025	12:30 PM	Arawata Deer	Pinebush, SI
Sunday, 12 January 2025	5:30 PM	Altrive Deer	Riversdale, SI
Monday, 13 January 2025	2:00 PM	Wilkins Farming Stag Sale	Athol, SI
Tuesday, 14 January 2025	1:00 PM	Littlebourne Wapiti	Browns, SI
Tuesday, 14 January 2025	3:30 PM	Tikana Wapiti	Browns, SI
Wednesday, 15 January 2025	1:00 PM	Clachanburn Elk	Ranfurly, SI

Wilkins Farming

Wilkins Farming is pleased to offer a new sire, purchased from Netherdale Red Deer Stud, Balfour, which was established in 1979 by David and Lynley Stevens. Known as New Zealand's premium Red Deer velvet breeder, they held their last on-farm sale January 2024.

With this in mind, we knew there were likely to be sire stags for sale that would have normally been retained by the stud, and so we seized this unique opportunity to invest in an outstanding young velvet sire, who we have named Netherdale.

Netherdale is an incredibly impressive young sire who boasts both credible growth and outstanding, award-winning velvet. In recognition of his velvet, he won the **three** main awards at the December 2023 New Zealand Deer Farmers National Velvet & Trophy award ceremony: People's Choice, 3-year-old Section and Supreme Champion.

I would once again like to commend David and Lynley of Netherdale Red Deer Stud for what they have achieved with their focus of breeding great velvet producing animals. Our respect for what they have created is apparent in the confidence we had when purchasing this high value sire.

We are beyond excited about our new sire stag Netherdale, whose bloodlines are rich in proven genetics, with Bronx on the sire side and going back to No1 and Wardlaw on the dam side. We are

planning on selling his semen and in-calf hinds strategically, and are looking forward to seeing his offspring prosper when mated with daughters from within our herd, from the likes of Rock Me, Ali, Maple, Cardrona and Colman. ■

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Udder success

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

The development of deer dairying captures perfectly the pioneering spirit of our industry. Against all odds, grass-roots farmers and forward thinking supporters proved the seemingly impossible – turning a feral pest into an income generating livestock asset – was indeed possible.



PROOF OF CONCEPT: John and Mary Falconer proved that the commercial milking of deer was possible.

The story is much the same for a next-level development: deer dairying. Equal measures of entrepreneurial flair, problem solving and follow-through over the past decade have proved that the commercial milking of deer is possible, and the milk they produce is high quality and nutritionally charged.

I clearly remember heading off in March 2014 to Clachanburn Station in the heart of the Maniototo to get the story from John and Mary Falconer on how they had successfully managed to experimentally milk hinds. I couldn't imagine how a flight-and-fright animal would cope with up close handling on a dairying platform and I had to hold back a John McEnroe style "You cannot be serious" comment when John Falconer showed off the specially developed tiny two cluster silicone cup set made for milking the hinds. However, I realised soon after that deer dairying was no joke as Di Herron, a bovine-turned-cervidae milking manager, ushered into a four stall milking shed hinds who without fuss stood for cupping up and milking.



TRAILBLAZER: Di Herron, the world's first deer dairy manager in 2014 at Clachanburn.

Graeme Shaw, a Queenstown and Sydney-based entrepreneur hatched the idea of deer dairying during wine and cheese tasting at a friend's deer farm. He believed that deer milk could be a unique and extra special, high value food ingredient and started looking for a deer farmer to turn the idea into reality. Networking and phone calls led him to John Falconer, who said he'd never considered the idea but was "open minded" about giving it a go. In

November 2012 the first hinds were milked, in a padded deer crush using a singular mini goat-sized, silicone lined cup. From embryonic beginnings small-scale commercial success was achieved – the production of super creamy deers' milk for cheesemaking. However, the Falconers chose not to pursue deer milking and mothballed the idea at the end of 2014.

Shaw persevered with deer milking, meeting and convincing West Otago deer farmers Pete and Sharon McIntyre to diversify into deer dairying on their West Otago farm at Benio near Gore, milking the first hinds in 2015.

Meanwhile in Canterbury, equity farming partners Graham Carr (Peel Forest Estate) and Mark Faulks were also gearing up for the newest deer diversification. They too were convinced of the deer milking potential after a visit to the Falconers' and cupped up the first hinds in 2015 at Lincoln Hills, forming Deer Milking NZ in 2016. This year they'll milk 250 – 300 hinds from January until April at a near-new facility at Peel Forest Estate.

After a one year milking arrangement with Shaw, the McIntyres formed a supply relationship with Pāmu.



CUPS ON: Around 750 deer will be commercially milked in New Zealand this season. Photo credit: Deer Milking NZ

Ballpark milk production per hind is one litre a day

Shaw went on to launch an array of deer milk-based skincare products under the Kotia brand (Kotia.co.nz).

Diversification into deer dairying by Pāmu started in 2016 and now, in addition to the McIntyre contract supply arrangement, includes Aratiatia, near Taupo, where about 300 hinds will be milked this season.

Nationally, the conservative ballpark milk production per hind is one litre a day; it's difficult to guesstimate total industry production. Suffice to say it's much lower than the goat and sheep industries, but the milk value much higher.

The deer milking industry has a long way to go before achieving critical mass. However, the blueprint for production and specialist small-scale processing requirements are in place. At the same time scientific research is uncovering and confirming the unique and health-giving qualities of the super creamy milk. Where to next, and what does the future hold for deer dairy in New Zealand?

Watch this space.

It's a value proposition

Adding value rather than volume will define and shape the future of deer dairying, Hamish Glendinning, Pāmu deer milk business lead says.

“I think New Zealand agriculture needs to focus more on value rather than volume and deer milk is exactly that. It's a value play offer.”

There's potential to grow the fledgling industry but Glendinning is adamant that growth has to be demand-led.

“We need to build the platform for demand through consumer education and science-backed research. This will give us the confidence to build the supply side and avoid a boom and bust situation.”

“The real fun with deer milk starts once it leaves the farm gate. It will take years to fully develop markets but there are promising green shoots.”

But balancing supply with demand is easier said than done.

“We don't have mature international markets as such for deer milk so if we have oversupply, there simply aren't the outlets to sell to. It reiterates the importance of building the demand side.”

Another constraint is market access.

“I spend a lot of time working with MPI on this as most countries and potential markets haven't heard of deer milk before, let alone how to classify or categorise it. So there's a lot of work in educating and negotiating access to new markets.”

Glendinning has led the Pāmu deer milk portfolio for five years and points to three key milestones over that time: establishing an on farm risk management programme in conjunction with Pete and Sharon McIntyre; developing the spray drying process for deer milk which has a different composition profile to cow, sheep and goat milks; and selling Pāmu Deer Milk commercially for the first time in 2018 as a unique food ingredient.

“We sold it into the food service market because it had the lowest barriers to entry but at the same time we had a brilliant tasting, unique product that captured the attention of chefs.”

The unconventional mammalian milk captured national and international attention, earning Pāmu wins at the 2018 NZ Food Awards and Fieldays Innovation Award category; and in 2022 Pāmu Deer Milk was named the Best Dairy Ingredient at the World Dairy Innovation Awards in France.

While foodservice is still part of the business, albeit a small one, instead Pāmu research and development effort is targeting Pāmu Deer Milk as a natural human nutrition product. The whole milk powder is ideally suited to people whose diets are lacking in vital energy and nutrients, validated by a published 2023 clinical study. The study - a world first for deer milk - compared Pāmu Deer Milk to a market leading oral nutritional supplement in women aged 65-and-older. The results proved that the nutritional status and physical functionality properties of Pāmu Deer Milk competed alongside the oral nutritional supplement and outperformed in some areas such as increasing mobility and reducing bone

Deer dairy diehards

Pete and Sharon McIntyre and son Chris are embarking on their tenth season of deer dairying. This season 160 hinds will be milked for contract supply to Pāmu. Looking back, it's been a decade of discovery and a huge investment of time and money. Setting up the plant, training the hinds, learning the right pulsation..... and the list goes on, Pete McIntyre says.

“There was a lot of problem solving initially, and we had to be creative at times,” he says.

“It's proved to be very labour intensive for the small volume of milk.”

There's potential to increase the milking herd but that has to happen in line with demand.

“We've gone as far as we can with it for the meantime, so we need to find more markets before we consider expanding.”

His hope is that the hard work will pay off creating a profitable business. Meanwhile the McIntyres continue to enjoy the up close contact with their deer, a spin-off from the deer milking handling and management.

“Deer are very responsive to increased contact and we love the interaction with them. Our farm is like no other, as we have a large number of friendly deer.”



TALKING THE TALK: Hamish Glendinning explains the health-giving qualities of deer milk at a South East Asia trade event .



CHEERS TO DEER: Pāmu Deer Milk is available online and also targeted at Asian markets.



breakdown. This type of research validates the unique nutritional benefits of deer milk, which Pāmu will use in the development of convenient ready-to-use natural and high nutritional value products.

The Pāmu deer milking business is a long way off critical mass, but Glendinning is confident of getting there.

“If we were to get to say 500,000 litres, it would be a pretty interesting business, but there’s a lot of work to do.”

Achieving that milestone will be dependent on three things: further work to boost on-farm efficiency and milk yield and validating financial viability; market development; and more science to underpin the value proposition, he says. All need to happen in tandem, which takes money, raising the questions of who and how future industry development should be funded. Is now the time for some industry backing given that deer milk could be complementary

to velvet and venison, and add resilience to a deer farming system?

“My opinion is the industry should be continuing to maximise venison and velvet returns but at the same time consider how new products such as deer milk could benefit from wider collaboration.

“I think there’s an opportunity with investment from the industry to speed up certain aspects of deer milking, with a view that one day it will fall under the deer industry banner,” Glendinning says.

Meanwhile, he’s loving the full immersion into a new and novel industry.

“I work across the entire chain from farm to market, so I have about 15 different hats I wear interchangeably, but that’s what I love about it.

“It’s something truly unique and it follows the pioneering spirit of deer farming in New Zealand.

The crème de la crème of milk

Telling the story, educating the market on the health-giving benefits, and developing high value products for the nutraceutical and pet care markets are all on the To Do list of Rebecca Davidson, Deer Milking NZ commercial operations manager.

Rothesay Deer Sire and Elite Yearling Hind Sale

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roth.greig@farmside.co.nz

BBQ and refreshments after sale

It's an ambitious list but one of those tasks has been successfully ticked off: the launch last year of Nutrideer a pet supplement range using deer milk and natural, New Zealand-sourced ingredients. The range of five pet wellbeing supplements has captured attention securing nomination in two categories (favourite newcomer, and favourite small business) in this year's Pet Industry Awards 2024.



TELLING THE STORY: Rebecca Davidson is actively promoting deer milk's unique health-giving benefits to global markets and manufacturers.

The launch and industry recognition has been a morale booster in an evolving business that's navigated roadblocks right the way along the supply to end user chain.

"Deer milking is not easy; the deer management, the milking process, the hours, the compliance, the regulation, and the commercialisation of deer milk and products - it all takes time and is hard work," Davidson says.

She credits the passion, tenacity and resilience of her team, including head milker Simon Wakefield and founders Graham Carr and Mark Faulks for what's been achieved thus far.

"Every year there's been a new chapter in our deer milking journey. Each season, we've tweaked and changed our operation whether it be how we manage the deer, what we feed them, how we run the milking shed or whatever to ensure cost efficiencies and maximise milk yield."

"...our research is exciting, especially in the protein profile, where the magic is happening."

The relocation last year of the milking platform at Lincoln Hills to Peel Forest Estate, alongside the super-sized wintering shed, was a huge milestone.

The long term end game is in the natural nutrition and skincare markets.

"We see a real opportunity to position deer milk as a high value ingredient for nutraceutical products because of the unique and exciting bioactive compounds, and our research is exciting, especially in the protein profile, where the magic is happening," she says.

"We are actively promoting our deer milk as an ingredient to global markets and manufacturers, which has led to some level of interest and engagement."

Davidson's vision is to scale up milk production to 50,000 litres a season and secure the accolade of producing the "world's most premium milk". Reaching that milestone will mean significant upscaling of business which could mean forming relationships with deer farmer suppliers in a turn-key facility-type arrangement.

In the meantime, she will keep telling the deer milking story and work at making inroads to the nutraceutical industry, focusing on one or two global markets. ■

Nutritional facts

The milking is the starting point but equally important is the R&D necessary to identify, validate and capitalise on deer milk's unique health giving benefits. Deer Milking NZ commissioned Callaghan Innovation to analyse deer milk composition and the results suggest it's a high value nutritional ingredient. In comparison to bovine and ovine milks deer milk has:

High milk solids: It comprises 25% milk solids (MS) in comparison to other milks which are typically 8 – 18% MS.

High fat/good fat: It has a high percentage of quality fat suggesting that the complex lipid composition could be a better source of 'good fat' nutrients than other milks.

High quality protein: It has three times more the amount of protein than cow milk, and a higher percentage protein than both sheep and goat milk.

Bioactive properties not seen in other protein sources: Unique peptides, amino acids, key vitamins and minerals. Also, it has lactoferrin, a protein with antiviral, antibacterial and antioxidant properties that helps the body transport and absorb iron. In cows the level of lactoferrin usually depends on the phase of lactation but in deer this is up to nine times higher and remains consistently high throughout the season.

Source: deermilkingnz.com



CREAMY GOODNESS: Deer milk has unique bioactive properties and is high in good fats and quality proteins. Photo credit: Deer Milking NZ



PET FAVOURITE: Deer Milking NZ's Nutrideer pet supplement range. Photo credit: Deer Milking NZ

European venison marketing highlights

Shannon Campbell, DINZ executive chef

In Europe, the broad range of venison promotional activity and an equally broad range of market partners has been a 2024 highlight.

Full credit to our in-market partners who, despite a reduced budget, have run innovative marketing events during the year, keeping New Zealand venison front of mind with European wholesalers and consumers.

A key player this year, after a lull in engagement, was international catering wholesaler Hanos. The business, with a growing number of stores throughout Holland, Belgium and the border areas of Germany, is looking to pick up customers and enhance its place in the hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) industry following the sale of Metro wholesalers in Belgium to Sligro in Holland.

A focus of the Hanos marketing strategy was engagement with chefs and restaurateurs in close proximity to each of their stores, inviting them to exclusive and inspirational sessions based around a particular product. New Zealand venison was one of the products featured in a series of culinary experiences where I was able to demonstrate and explain in up close settings its unique quality attributes. This kind of targeted marketing allows us to reach the right client with the right venison product and provide them with a unique and memorable sensory experience.

Hanos also arranged an online Masterclass featuring 10 venison recipes, all filmed and printed in its magazine, which is distributed to 50,000 card holders. And there's more – Hanos held exclusive

evening events for their best clients where NZ venison was included in a three-course menu, and in a series of wildly popular Christmas Fairs. The dedication of Hanos to NZ venison extended beyond the promotional management team to their culinary advisers who requested NZ venison in their 'Culinary Theatres,' an upmarket kitchen/demonstration area in each store.

Innovative and original

Chefs Culinar/Citti is a two-pronged business with a significant influence in the European food scene. Chefs Culinar is one of the largest logistics service providers to HORECA in central Europe, and Citti in the north of Germany has a huge supermarket retail footprint and delivers to restaurants and hotels in the areas around each store.

Chefs Culinar drove new levels of original engagement this year. New Zealand has a longstanding and fruitful partnership with the business which allowed us to workshop some new and interesting promotional events far removed from the old style in-store tasting stand. Instead, there were daytime events at three locations in the north of Germany for invited chefs and local restaurant owners, as well as a paid ticket evening event for local customers of Citti stores who got a five course menu featuring NZ venison and wine from Villa Maria. It was a smart marketing model, with the paid ticket event covering the cost of turning out a really special daytime event for the food professionals.

“For me it’s been heartening to have many people talk to me about the great New Zealand venison dishes they sampled at events several years ago.”

Freshly grilled NZ venison steaks were served to about 800 people a day as part of Citti's 50 year celebrations. However, the creme de la creme promotional opportunity with Citti was their invitation to showcase NZ venison as the protein of choice at the Chefs Culinar house fairs, attended by around 10,000 people over two days in four German cities. Attendees observed in a glass booth, on the big screen (or both) a cutting demonstration of a NZ venison Denver leg and then sampled it in three different recipes. There were also high quality recipe books with 12 recipes, packed full of information about NZ venison. It was a perfect opportunity to refresh and reiterate the qualities of NZ venison.

Winning performance

NZ venison was a winner at the Paris Olympics thanks to sponsorship from Alliance UK who put together the menu for their onsite restaurant at NZ House. A venison burger packed full of nutrients



FINE TIME: the final gala dinner at this year's Fine Food Days in Cologne.



HOT IN THE CITTI: Shannon Campbell (right) prepping at a Citti-run event. The food-based business delivers to restaurants and hotels close to its huge supermarket outlets.

and protein for the sports people and a delicious steak for the invited dignitaries and guests at the closing ceremony were perfect and took pride of place in the two weeks that defined one of NZ sports most successful endeavours. Over that time there were around 10,000 visitors to NZ House, creating the perfect opportunity to present NZ venison as a true champion in the pantheon of proteins.

A fine time had by all

Once again NZ venison featured at Fine Food Days in Cologne, where the city's finest restaurateurs and caterers roll out a series of events over 10 days. This has fast become one of the premiere events in Germany's gastronomic calendar, and it has been a privilege to grow our presence over the last few years. After an opening event for 400 guests in an old Monastery, there was a New Zealand-inspired evening held in Cologne Sky, high above the city. This year there were many unique and novel food settings: a six course meal on a Ferris wheel; a gourmet picnic in a cable car; a luxurious dinner on the field of a football stadium; and a six course venison-centric menu with lashings of the best NZ wine hosted by me. The final gala dinner also featured NZ venison in dishes served at the prize giving event, attended by 200 guests including the grandees of the gastro scene. The most pleasing aspect of this event was the number of guests who recalled in very favourable terms NZ venison from past years. Its high quality has created positive and lasting impressions.

The planned events and activities promoting NZ venison are all important in relationship-building with chefs and restaurants. In many cases, these connections led to unplanned events including kitchen parties, one-off events at wholesalers, and invitations to present to distributor sales. These smaller-scale gatherings all help to ignite the passion for our NZ venison products and open doors for opportunities to build the story and stand out in the crowded protein product market where players are clamouring for the attention of in-market partners.

For me, it's been heartening to have many people talk to me about the great New Zealand venison dishes they sampled at events several years ago. In many cases, I've forgotten the venue and details, but they have retained tidbits of information about the delicious NZ venison they sampled. It's affirming and encouraging to know that our efforts do not go unnoticed, that our brands are recognised and respected, and that our NZ venison product is highly regarded! ■



CUTTING EDGE: in-market partners Chefs Culinair/Citti launched new and innovative venison-based events.



Triple success for Linton farmer

Tony Leggett, *Deer Industry News* writer

Longtime deer farmer Robbie Byres snared the Champion of Champions title and the People's Choice Award with his class-winning five-year-old entry in this year's DFA Central Regions and Taihape Velvet Competition.

His triple success at the judging on November 23 was a first in his many years of farming deer, most recently near Linton, southeast of Palmerston North.

The winning velvet entry weighed 10.24kg and was cut off a five-year-old from his 250-head velvetting herd run on his 48ha deer unit, tucked under the ranges on easy to medium hill country.

No two seasons are ever the same in his patch of the Manawatu, and this year was no exception.

"We had our best winter ever this year on the farm, but we then had one of our worst springs with lots of cool, wet and windy weather," Byres says.

When the spring weather did finally improve, the final third of his mixed age stags still to be cut for the first time responded immediately with significantly quicker growth than the earlier mobs.

Byres buys in replacement velvet stags each year from a small number of South Island deer studs and says he has limited background information on the stag which cut the winning velvet.

"The studs select their own replacements and just put up lines of 10 or so as two-year-olds so you know what they cut at that age, but there is not much other information offered on their background.

"I always try to buy my replacements from the top end of the lots on offer each year, and generally pay between \$1500 and \$2300 per head for them, depending on who else is there," he says.

In more recent years, Byres says the stags he has bought from the South Island have typically cut 3.5kg or more per head as two-year-olds.

"Some people say that South Island deer don't settle well in the North Island, but because they arrive in mobs of 10 or so, they quickly get used to their new surroundings."

His 250 velvet stags are managed in four mobs over the winter, three mixed age mobs plus a separate mob of each year's new arrivals with a few of the previous year's consignment included so they learn where gates are and get used to being fed baleage and palm kernel.

He was happy with this year's first cut average of close to 7kg of velvet over the 250 head, saying it was a pleasing result given the tougher spring than usual on his property.

Visiting Hawke's Bay judge Keith Burden worked his way through a total of 36 entries over eight classes. He noted several entries were showing external damage but was impressed with the overall standard of entries, reflecting the reasonably kind winter for most of the region.

"Weight is important, but it's not always the heaviest head that wins each class and that has shown up in the results of this year's competition," he said. ■



TRIFECTA SUCCESS: Three wins at the Central Regions and Taihape Velvet Competition was a first for longtime deer farmer Robbie Byres.



POPULAR CHOICE: At the North Island Velvet Competition Bernice Ramsey accepted on behalf of F J Ramsey Investments Ltd the Champion of Champions and People's Choice Awards.

Big benefits from using elk/wapiti sires

Premium prices over the last year for elk/wapiti velvet, trophy heads and hybrid venison are proof of the terminal advantage.

“Elk velvet is paying 20 to 30% premium over red,” John Falconer says. “We are also looking at a 10 to 15% premium for venison with a certain percentage of elk genetics. In addition, we have the ability to grow carcasses to higher weights. An elk hybrid with a 100kg carcass is worth about twice that of a 55kg average deer. There’s also solid demand for elk for the trophy market. We just can’t breed enough of them.”

John says he’s noticed a return to elk/wapiti sires by some large-scale operators who have tried other terminal sire genetics.

Clachanburn breeds big-bodied venison animals, with a heavy but tidy velvet that can be grown out to a decent trophy head.

“Unlike a beef bull or ram, an elk bull or stag grown out for the trophy market can potentially be worth many more times its meat value.”

He’s particularly pleased with home-bred bull Tombstone who epitomises Clachanburn’s all-round performer, weighing in at 210kgs, with an EMA of over 40 at 13 months. He was a 2023

National Velvet competition winner and judging by the even tine placement and the symmetry of his velvet will be an outstanding trophy prospect.

At Clachanburn’s annual sale in January around 60 bulls will be on offer, all selected and bred from genetics for the “real world”.

This year’s sales catalogue information will have in-herd EBVs, which John believes will better reflect the genetic merit of Clachanburn sires.

“We have been indicating a move to in-herd values for a while as we believe the across herd EBV’s aren’t reliable. We’re hugely disappointed that there’s not a Deer Select across breed evaluation when we know it’s possible in the dairy industry,” he says.

“In reality, our sale bulls are not pampered. They spend most of their first three years on the hill-country. They shift well and adapt to new areas so buyers can be sure they are investing in true three-way performers.” ■

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NZDFA Executive Committee: Chair Mark McCoard, Justin Stevens, Karen Middelberg, Evan Potter

Young guns in action

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

The world's first Young Deer Farmer Competition was a winner on all accounts.

The two-stage event was a broad range practical and theoretical workout for the 22 people taking part, ranging in age from 16 to 25.

The main event on Friday, 11 October was a perfect blue sky day. The 22 competitors, all in specially designed competition tee-shirts, met at Peel Forest hall and after briefing were put in exam mode, putting pen to paper in a deer knowledge quiz. They were also presented with an intensive winter grazing scenario and had to explain how they would practically manage the system within environmental limits. With the paper work out of the way the contingent headed down the road to Peel Forest Estate's deer shed, the base for seven practical exercises, each assessed by a SCNO branch member. Kelly Bennett took care of the velvet grading; Henry Pearse oversaw the mock velvetting of a mounted trophy stag head placed in a crush; Regan Blair and Donald Whyte, armed with measuring tapes and SCI documents, took charge of hard antler measuring; Connor Hillson oversaw weaner weighing; a team from Geraldine High School's Primary Industry Academy took charge of a fencing exercise; and Graham Peck was in charge of the tractor competency course. The final task had competitors selecting stags based on breed value information for two different farming systems presented by Tom Macfarlane.

After completion of the tasks, competitors checked out Peel Forest Estate's super-sized wintering barn. There was claybird shooting and a BBQ during which the five finalists were announced: Logan

Hunter, Henry Wilson, Eddie Millichamp, Quinten Rowe (Mt Possession), and Charlie Westgarth.

Although competitive, several of the next gen contestants said learning and meeting others was a highlight of the event.

The event received funding from the NZDFA's through the DINZ-administered Producer Manager's 'Leadership Development' fund.

Lead organisers of the event Danette McKeown (also RAP chair) and SCNO chair Mark Tapley, both rated the event as a success.

The idea for a two-in-one competition and social event had taken shape over the year, Tapley said.

"Our hope is that this event will create a template that other branches can use."

"We'd talked about it for a long time and decided we just had to get on and do it. It was great to get the support of so many of our members."

How many would sign up for the event was an unknown and to have more contestants than anticipated was "affirming", McKeown said.

"Overall, the event went better than I expected. I was waiting for an issue or complication that we hadn't anticipated but all seemed to run very smoothly. We were very fortunate to have a good crew



JOB DONE: Lead organisers Mark Tapley and Danette McKeown had lots of positive feedback about the inaugural competition.



TIME OUT: Quinten Rowe (left) was a competition finalist, Liam Evers got a spot prize for his 'all-round positive attitude', and Will Grant's spot prize was for 'problem solving unknown tasks'.

of people that stepped in when they saw the need. It definitely helped that it was a beautiful sunny day and a great location and facilities with the backdrop of Mt Peel - Huatekerekere. “

The competition was a success at several levels, she said; it was a social occasion for the branch, an opportunity for contestants to meet more people from the industry, and a good way to highlight the passion within the industry.

“It encourages young farmers to build skills. We believe building knowledge and confidence increases keenness for working with



MEASURING UP: Angela Blair assists Will Grant with hard antler measuring.

deer in the future. Our hope is that this event will create a template that other branches can use.”

Funding for the competition was supported by the NZDFA-administered Producer Manager’s Leadership Development fund with some of the money used to contract the services of McKeown to develop and coordinate the event.

Contact DINZ producer manager Lindsay Fung with any questions about possible support. ■



THE LOWDOWN: Judge Henry Pearse (right) talks through the velvetting demo exercise with Alex Price.



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NZDFA Branch Chairs meeting drives valuable two-way conversations

Cameron Frecklington, DINZ communications manager

This year's New Zealand Deer Farmers Association (NZDFA) Branch Chairs meeting in Wellington in early October was a welcome gathering of regional representation for the deer industry, led by the NZDFA Executive Committee and with eager participation by Deer Industry New Zealand (DINZ) board and staff.

Topics covered over the two-day meeting included everything from market access to China for frozen velvet (at the time unresolved) to the direction of deer science research to DINZ's strategy for the future, among a host of other topics of interest.

"The Branch Chairs meeting held in Wellington in October each year is a key event on the NZDFA calendar," NZDFA Executive Committee Chair Mark McCoard says. "It allows all the NZDFA team to assemble in one place and discuss the issues deer farmers are facing, both at a branch and national level. Additionally, it allows the NZDFA representatives to have in-person contact with the DINZ executive and board to further address farmer concerns so that well-informed decisions can be made."

With the speed at which farmers are expected to address change, at the same time facing an aging population of farmers, the NZDFA stands on the edge of a new era. This is not unique to the NZDFA, as the wider agricultural sector is facing these same challenges. And while much is said about how a generation of farmers are aging out, less is said about how this will affect industry governance and representation.

"Many of the early pioneers are now exiting our industry, which highlights challenges at a farm level with land use change but also at an industry representative level. If new entrants are not attracted to our industry, critical mass becomes a serious concern. Equally, new farmers and representatives bring energy and new ideas to an industry or organisation. The NZDFA Next Generation programme has never been more important in this current climate," says McCoard.

As such, it was encouraging to see six New Faces, so called as they are there by invitation by their respective branch chair in a bid to attract fresh participants into industry representation. New faces at this year's meeting were Maia Richmond (Central Region), Michelle Cowley (Taranaki), Matt Kryz (Bay of Plenty), Colin Jordan (South Canterbury-North Otago), Chantee McCloy (Canterbury-West Coast) and Alan Clarke (Elk & Wapiti Society).

"Heading to the branch chairs meeting as a New Face was a great opportunity to meet the industry leaders in person and to see people from other regions that you would not often get the chance to meet," Michelle Cowley says.

"It was reassuring to hear that the DFA recognise the importance of keeping all branches running, particularly the smaller ones who might be anticipating having to close. And it was great to see a range of other New Faces from around the country, showing that there is still a lot of young enthusiasm coming through the industry."

As with long-term planning for the future of NZDFA governance, so too were there candid sessions around long-term strategic directions, with a good amount of two-way discussion and senior industry leaders on hand to answer questions.

"Having the DINZ board and CEO discuss openly the direction that they are taking, and their aspirational goals, was informative. We [branch chairs] can now take that information back to our members and share it with them. In addition, listening to the board members gave me a better understanding of their contribution to the DINZ board function. I found that to be very beneficial," Southland DFA chair Tony Roberts says.

"A noticeable shift in communication from the CEO and the board was appreciated."

After a somewhat challenging year, this was a chance to settle the waters and return to a view to the future, while at the same time getting some feedback on the present.

"The annual NZDFA Branch Chairs meeting is the DFA's second biggest event of the year, behind the annual industry conference," DINZ Producer Manager Lindsay Fung says. "It's a really good chance to bring voices and perspectives from around the country together to listen and get an idea of what is on the minds of our industry's farmers, represented by their branch chairs."

"The chairs can now return to their regions with some valuable information on what DINZ is doing, and DINZ is now aware of what farmers are thinking and feeling." ■



ALL EARS: The annual NZDFA Branch Chairs meeting is a "key event," aimed at facilitating information transfer within the deer industry

Calcium, magnesium crucial in deer farming

Across all farming types, the importance of soil health cannot be understated. The impact pastures have on animal performance, their health, and farm profitability are directly related to mineral content and balance within the topsoil.

Most farmers will recognise this by observing pasture growth and animal performance.

Deer are alert animals and little things can have a big impact. When we visit deer farms, the deer certainly know when someone unfamiliar is about.

So why are calcium and magnesium so important?

Arguably the most important reason is **animal temperament**.

Many people take magnesium supplements to help them relax and sleep. This effect is no different for animals. Deer can be highly strung and flighty, especially when they don't get worked much during the year. The calming influence of correct soil magnesium is obvious when tracking a deer farm's journey from deficient magnesium to optimum, not only on the deer but even the farmer sometimes!

Secondly, calcium for **strong bones and velvet growth**.

Calcium is the king of minerals and the transporter of all other nutrients. If your soil is calcium deficient, then the supply of other essential nutrients is also restricted. Growing velvet is all about

calcium, and consistent velvet weight gains are hugely reliant on having optimum calcium in your topsoil.

And finally, the balance of calcium and magnesium determines **soil structure**.

Calcium loosens soil, and magnesium tightens it. The correct amount of each provides the right air and water content within the soil colloids. This gives the land a cushioning effect, meaning pugging will bounce back better and biology will thrive. When this happens, more nutrients are provided to the plant and ultimately the stock.

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Cutting it with the best

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

Merrivale stags have smartened up their production credentials over the last seven years, growing more velvet and earning more money from each kilogram of dry matter eaten.



GAME CHANGER: Josh said that the new 1730m² wintering barn had helped lift the velvet performance of young deer. He is pictured with Pippa (2) and Chelsea with (left to right) Luca (5), and Ella (7).

Merrivale Deer Farm

Josh & Chelsea Gill and daughters Luca, Ella & Pippa.

Velvet production, weaner breeding and sale of velvet stags on 560ha (460ha effective) flat to steep hill country at the northern foot of the Longwood Range in Western Southland near Tuatapere.

- Rainfall: 1400mm
- 2024 wintered stock
- (7072 su; 15.2su/ha)

Hinds

MA 828 | R2 170 | R1 405

Velvet stags

MA 672 | R2 378 | R1 405

Sheep

300

2023-24 Velvet stats

	Number	Velvet kg/av	Total (kg)
MA stags	619	7.43	4600
Regrowth MA stags			
2YO	462	4.03	1861.5
Spikers	390	2.1	819.5
			7910

In 2023 the mixed-age (MA) stags cut on average 2.67kg more velvet than in 2016. Over the same period their efficiency at converting drymatter to velvet almost doubled and the average return per kilogram of velvet cut increased by 20 cents.

The steady improvement in velvet performance follows a focused and deep dive into genetic investment by Merrivale’s Josh and Chelsea Gill. This investment, along with changed wintering management and feeding, were covered at a Southland Deer Farmers Association (DFA) field day in early October attended by 30 farmers.

“Get feeding right at button drop and get a 20% benefit in velvet yield. ”

Josh explained that over the last decade he had set his sights on growing more velvet and increasing the number of two-year-plus velvetting stags by 370 to 1070.

The first step from 2013 until 2017 was increasing the velvet maternal base, buying in about 200 hinds from Southland breeders Gary Baldwin, Todd Anderson, Altrive and Brock Deer. Several of these animals were DNA recorded, which prompted Gill to get on board with the recording technology.

“It took eight years to get the information we needed to use for culling out the bottom end of the velvet herd,” Gill said.

Selection

He has developed his own selection process and screening for hinds and replacement velvet stags. All hinds are DNA recorded, and this information contributes to a rating system using Gallagher TSi Livestock Manager and Animal Performance Software (APS) to select hinds for an elite, ex-elite and commercial hind mobs. A zero-rated animal means there is no data and/or stag progeny on which to base a rating. Elite hinds must achieve above a certain score, and if they dip below it they’re relegated to the ex-elite mob. However, they can earn their place back in the elite mob if the velvet performance from subsequent progeny measures up. The elite MA mob hovers around 478, including rising two-year-olds (R2s), while the ex-elite and commercial hinds (including R2s) sit around 490.

The same focused approach and monitoring is followed in selecting velvet stags. The velvet weight of spikers is recorded, and all are wintered. Their gateway to Merrivale’s velvet mob is based on the style and the weight cut at two-year-old (2YO). During 2023-24 the 462 spikers wintered and the average 2YO cut was 4.03kg. Gill kept 207 (average cut 4.71kg) and sold or culled the remaining 255. A similar selection process is applied to older age groups to identify and offload the underperformers and raise the production

bar. Across all velvet age groups, 400 were sold or culled this year. The selling of surplus velvet animals is now an established and reliable income stream.

Moving more young deer indoors did not reduce wintering costs, but the animals were performing better.

Supporting the rigorous selection progress is an equally focused artificial breeding programme, which started with the artificial insemination (AI) of 60 hinds over 2018 and 2019. The AI cost of each in-calf hind varied according to scanning performance, and the cost per straw ranged from about \$1009 (based on a \$500 straw and 55% scanning) to \$126 (based on Merrivale-collected sire semen and 75% scanning).

For the past five years, embryo transfer (ET) implants have been used to accelerate genetic improvement in the top-end of the velvet herd. This year, eggs were flushed from 14 of Merrivale's top hinds, fertilised with semen from the top performing stags based on weight and style and implanted in 85 recipient hinds. The hinds scanned 83%, which worked out at about \$645 each for the 70 in-calf hinds.

The infusion of new genetics over the last eight years has created an excellent breeding base for velvet production, and the Gills are maximising that potential through smart feeding, especially in the lead up to button drop, Southland vet and elk breeder Dave Lawrence said.

"The fact that Josh has managed to double (total) velvet cut from his two-year-olds in seven years is a big achievement and proof he's used DNA technology to good advantage, but it's clear he's also hitting the target with feeding."

Lawrence outlined the basics for effective pre-button drop feeding, emphasising the principles were the same as pioneering deer scientist Pete Fennessey discovered in early 1980s research – quality feed was essential post-rut for good velvet growth. Research in later years also showed the importance of high quality feed for pedicle initiation in rising one-year-old (R1) stags and in the three week lead-up to button drop for older stags.

"Get feeding right at button drop and get a 20% benefit in velvet yield" he said.

A pre button drop Southland Advance Party survey in 2019 looked at the feed values of spring grass and supplements. It showed that grass had a higher overall feed value than bought-in supplements.

"Many people think that grain, palm kernel and velvet nuts have a higher feed value, but fresh green grass out performs any supplement."

The other research finding of note was how feed requirements differed according to the age of stags. R1 animals needed feed

with crude protein (CP) of 22 – 25% for pedicle initiation. R2 stags coped with 18 – 22% CP, while MA stags needed 16 – 18% in the three week lead up to button drop.

Maintaining velvet stags in age groups, as the Gills did up until four-years-old, was a smart move because they could be fed according to their protein and energy requirements, Lawrence said.

At Merrivale, the goal was to have good pasture cover in the lead up to button drop and that required smart planning and management. Over the winter, deer apart from the breeding stags, were excluded from pastures. MA stags and 500 hinds were crop grazed; 500 hinds were set stocked on hills and weaners and R2 barn wintered. The goal was to have a feed buffer going into spring so that grass growth met the demand of the stags, although that didn't always pan out. Gill said the feed gap was boosted with a spring application of nitrogen, which was far cheaper than buying in supplements. However, the older stags got palm kernel from the middle until the end of August.

"We will supplement our other stags if covers drop below where we'd like them, but we haven't had to do that in the last couple of years."

Wintering

Young velvet stags and the Gills have benefitted from barn wintering. Merrivale fawns have been wintered indoors in a converted shed since 2019, and the payback – early pedicle development leading to a higher velvet yield from spikers – led to the building of a 1730m² five pen shed for the wintering of fawns and R2 stags for the first time this year. The barn, including fit-out, cost about \$350,000. Moving more young deer indoors did not reduce wintering costs, but the animals were performing better.



THREE THINGS: Good velvet is the result of the right genetics, the right feeding and the right management of both, Dave Lawrence said.



RAISING THE BAR: The head of a prize winning two-year-old. Investment in genetic technology and selection pressure over seven years has lifted the MA first cut velvet return per kilogram of drymatter eaten by 19 cents.

“It’s been a game changer,” Gill said.

“When the fawns come off the hill in January, they’re on the lighter side but wintering them in the shed helps them catch up.”

The deer are usually wintered indoors for 90 days, but this year, due to a 200ml dowsing of rain over three weeks in September, 400 R1 hinds were brought back indoors for another 50 days to take the pressure off sodden paddocks.

“We were running out of options, and the shed helped.”

Gill estimates that the increased velvet cut per head, about 800 grams, covers the cost of feeding. Although detailed liveweight gains are not recorded, he believes 250 grams a day is achievable based on the gains of small sample groups. High quality red clover with crude protein of 20 – 22% was the key to achieving those growth rates, he said. This year 900 bales of balage, 10 tonnes of grain and 7 tonnes of palm kernel were fed indoors. It was more than anticipated due to a longer barn wintering run for some of the young stock.

Winter feeding and management has changed to mitigate the potential damage of paddocks. That’s meant reducing the area of crop and number of deer grazing them and increasing the area of red clover grown for balage feeding indoors. This year 29ha of

crop (fodder beet, kale and swedes) was fed. Ten hectares each of red clover and white clover/pasture was grown for 1550 bales of balage. Next year 27.6ha of brassicas and beet will be fed, and 24ha of red clover for 1000 bales of balage. Another 550 – 600 bales will be cut from white clover and pasture.

Looking ahead

Changes to feeding and the bedding in of new genetics had taken a long time, and the gains were only now being reflected in production, he said.

“It’s been enjoyable to watch the genetics come through and produce (velvet) stags that are now up there with the best in the country.”

But there’s still more to do.

“We want to keep lifting the bottom line and improve the efficiency of our animals. We’ve made great progress, and it’s starting to snowball as our hind base improves. I can see a two-year-old, five kilogram average on the horizon which would be a massive achievement for a commercial herd running 400 two-year-olds.” ■



FUTURE FOCUSED: The Gills' goal is to achieve a 5kg velvet average from Merrivale's 400 commercial two-year-old stags.

In the red

After promising results this year, red clover balage will become the mainstay diet for barn wintered weaners and R2 stags. It's an expensive crop to grow and maintain but in a velvet system such as Merrivale's it offered 'real bang for buck', Dave Lawrence said.

“What you feed (to spikers) over that first winter impacts their lifetime of velvet production.”

They reached puberty sooner, which meant earlier pedicle initiation and more velvet.

At Merrivale, the 10ha of red clover will increase to 24ha, enough for 1000 balage bales, which will be fed along with 550 – 600 bales of white clover/pasture balage.

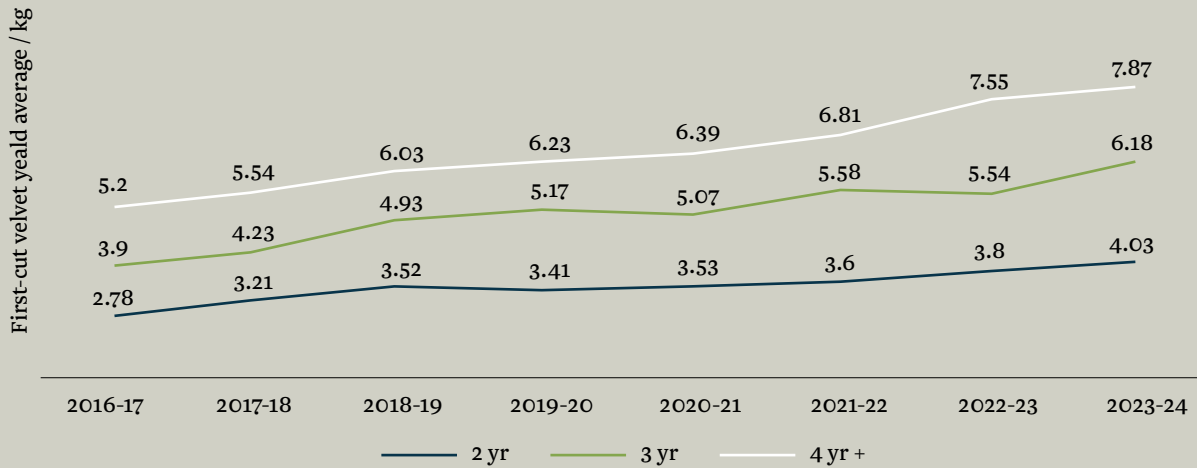


Quantifying efficiency

From 2016-17 to 2023-24 Merrivale's average first-cut MA velvet weight increased 2.67kg to 7.87kg. Over the same time 3YO velvet performance increased 2.28kg to 6.18kg; and 2YO 1.25kg to 4.03kg. Gill quantified in dollar terms the improved efficiency for each velvet stag category. For example, a MA stag consumed about 1500kgDM and based on 2016 MA numbers

(319) that meant each stag needed 288kgDM to produce a kilogram of velvet. By 2023-24 the 449 MA stags produced a kilogram of velvet from 190kgDM. The improved efficiency had increased the comparative (2016 vs 2023) returns per kilogram of velvet by about 20 cents, using a \$110/kg velvet price.

Average first cut velvet weight for each age group of stags from 2016 to 2024






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The same but different

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

Revisiting stories of the past is a great way of reflecting changes not only on farm but also at a wider industry level. Such was the case when *Deer Industry News* caught up with Maruia Valley farmers Tony and Sarah Peacock in May, 12 years on from a field day report that featured in a 2012 issue of the magazine.



LOOKING FORWARD: Tony, with Sarah, says over the next 12 years he has his sights on breeding the perfect elk bull and velvet stag for Haeremai's environment.

Tony and Sarah Peacock

Weaner breeding and finishing, velvet production, dairy grazing and dairy beef finishing on 388ha across three blocks in the Maruia Valley near Murchison: Haeremai (45 ha) and Stag (55ha) blocks on the Maruia River terraces; and Glengary (298 ha) a valley block, about 15kms west of Haeremai.

Wintered stock

Deer

- Hinds (red and a few elk) 780
- Stags (red velvet and venison, elk) 149
- R1s MS 57

Dairy heifers

- R1 & R2 123

Dairy beef

- R1 & R2 52

Sheep (Wiltshire)

- Ewes 110
- Hoggets 30

The high-level then-and-now synopsis is that the Peacocks have stuck to their core business but changed to a largely all-grass system to lighten their environmental footprint.

The changes were driven by altered perceptions and expectations locally, nationally and internationally of how farmers managed their farms. Tony Peacock says he's mindful of these influences and wants to do the right thing environmentally but within realistic financial parameters. He admits that being green and staying out of the red financially has him feeling at times like a duck paddling water.

"I'm paddling flat out beneath the surface," he says.

Doing the right thing environmentally has led to a 70 percent reduction in the area of forage crop grown. In 2012 on the Glengary block, six to eight hectares of rape was grown for hinds for summer grazing and another six hectares of kale for wintering. On the other two blocks, four hectares of kale was grown for elk, young velvet stags, and dairy heifers. A decade on, the area of forage crop grown on Haeremai is about four hectares. This winter, a kale crop was break-fed to dairy heifers and a swede crop lifted and fed to the elk bulls in a couple of feeders from mid-June until early September. The lifting of swede started about five years ago and has reduced the mud, pugging and wastage, and left the run-out swede paddock in better condition for regrassing.

The decision to reduce the area of crop followed disappointing yield and quality after switching to a no tillage system.

"I soon discovered that in this environment you really need to work the ground to grow good quality crops."

Adding to the no-till crop-growing challenge was the changing climate.



CHANGED VIEW: Tony says his farming system has changed and he's more open minded than 12 years ago.

“Twelve years ago we got runs of frost but as that became less, it meant that pests and diseases didn’t get knocked down over winter. We found we were spending more on sprays to grow crops that weren’t producing the tonnage and quality we expected.”

Enough was enough, and five years ago the call was made to farm a mostly no-tillage grass system. The move brought with it reduced chemical input, run-off and degradation of soils, which sat well environmentally with the Peacocks, but the implementation was easier said than done.

“Our strength is deer breeding because it suits the country and environment.”

The best management practice of the permanent pastures is still a work in progress, Peacock says. The base, a Wrightson grass mix, is direct-drilled in spring, while in late summer/early autumn it’s broadleaf weed sprayed before stitching in red clover, chicory and plantain.

The all-grass system has brought with it a change from granular to foliar fertiliser following the buying of a Tow and Fert Multi 1200 spray fertiliser two years ago. A dairy farming neighbour had one, and discussions with him convinced Peacock that foliar application was the way to go. Dolomite, urea and magnesium are added to the liquid fertiliser base, and pastures are sprayed in spring and autumn.

“We’re using about half the amount of (solid fertiliser) urea, and its saving us money, but the biggest thing we’ve noticed is that we’re green for a lot longer, and I believe overall animal health is better.”

In 2012, the Peacocks were eyeing development and subdivision of the Glengary block to increase hind carrying capacity to 1500, but that thinking changed.

“Back then, we were still intent on pushing production with diggers and drainage and development but that’s all changed with environmental regulation.”

But subdivision for environmental enhancement has happened; three wetlands have been fenced and another is planned for fencing. A local environmental and ecosystem restoration business and the Peacocks are developing the planting plan and have partnered with an importer/exporter friend keen for carbon credits to fund the planting.

Farm income is more or less equally split across deer weaner breeding and finishing, velvet production, dairy heifer grazing and dairy beef production.

“Our strength is deer breeding because it suits the country and environment,” Peacock says.

The diverse operation is managed by Peacock and Mike Collins, a fourth generation hunter on the farm.

The Peacocks run a hybrid breeding and finishing system, mating the mixed-age hinds to home-bred elk bulls, selling the progeny to Mountain River’s Northbank Station. The first draft of 400-500 goes in mid-March, and most of the rest in May. Those that miss the muster or are lighter weight are wintered and sent away the following February.

Elk sire bulls come from Edendale Station and Raincliff Station, and Tikana.

The Peacocks also breed some elk replacement cows.

Most of their velvet operation is based on genetics from Alf Kinzett from Murchison. They have a longstanding relationship with Kinzett who turns out velvet sires with a traditional clean head, Peacock says. Total velvet production is 800 – 850kgs, and over the past two seasons the red cut average was 6.2kg (first cut, two-years-plus), and elk 6.5kg (first cut, including two-year-olds).

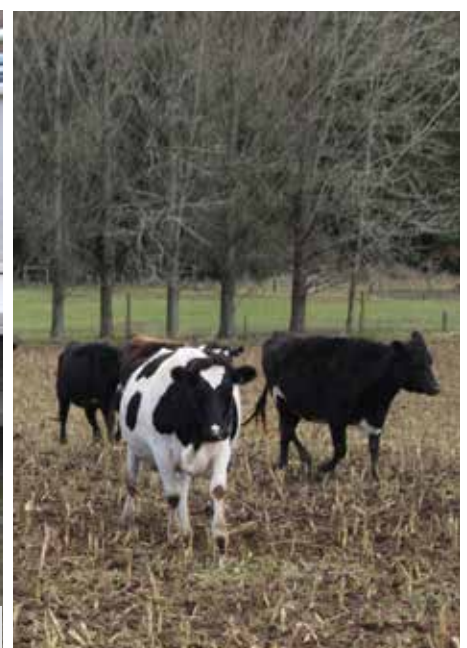
Over the last couple of years, the hind herd has been refreshed with the culling of the older animals. Rising-one-year-old (R1) replacement hinds were bought from Kinzett.



CART & CARRY: Sophia Collins, daughter of Haeremai farm manager Mike Collins, with swedes and the swede lifter.



POSSUM PLUCKER: Tane Collins, Sophia’s brother, is doing his best to knock back the possum population. He sets traplines and catches up to 60 a week.



CASH COWS: The grazing of a neighbour’s heifers provide regular cashflow.

Looking back at what was 12 years ago, Peacock says the big difference is his changed farming philosophy, which has been driven by the goal of reducing emissions.

“I think we’ve moved from a traditional to a more regenerative system – whatever that is. We’ve added diversity in several ways and I’m more open to looking at things differently than I was 12 years ago.”

In 12 years’ time, he hopes to be doing the same, but better.

“I still have the drive to breed the perfect elk bull and velvet stag, but I also want to get the farm developed so it’s a sustainable one-person operation.” ■



CUDDLING UP: Sophia Collins and Abbie, an orphan hind hand-reared by Tony Peacock’s mum, Judy.

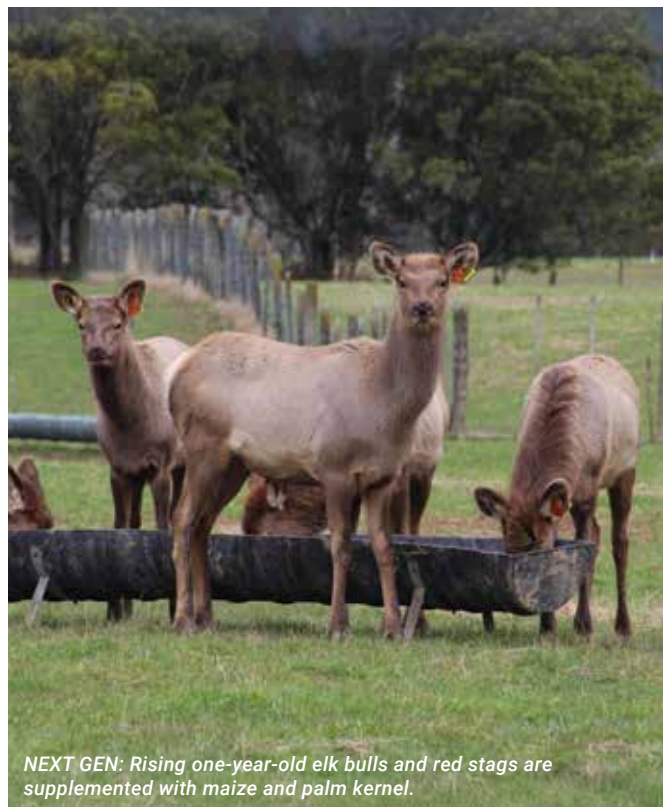
Group thinking

Tony Peacock is the immediate past chair of the Nelson branch of the Deer Farmers Association (DFA) and a member of the Marlborough/Tasman Advance Party. The DFA branch is not overly active and has about 20 members, most of whom have moved away from breeding to more velvet-focused systems. The Advance Party now fills a similar function to the DFA branch, he says, providing a forum to discuss topical farm-related issues as well as giving members the opportunity to see what other farmers are doing. The 12 to 15 regulars used to meet every couple of months but with the cut back in funding this has been reduced to three to four catch-ups a year. The group covers a wide range of terrain and environments, which has brought with it diversity in thinking and management.

“It’s become more of a discussion rather than focus group,” he says.

“It’s broadened our knowledge through the different experiences of our member farmers and given us a bigger toolbox of tips and management.”

Peacock is an advocate of community-led development and knows first-hand the power of group thinking and action; he’s a board member of Tasman Rugby and chair of the local recreational centre committee that fundraised for a new facility. Formal groups and networks bring together a range of opinions, ideas and experiences, which ultimately help move communities and organisations forward, he says. The Advance Party was a good example because input from all members helped paint the broader picture of the challenges and opportunities the deer industry faced.



NEXT GEN: Rising one-year-old elk bulls and red stags are supplemented with maize and palm kernel.

Thumbs up for farm environment plan workshops

Lynda Gray, *Deer Industry News* editor

The third and final farm planning workshop on 20 November at the Waikaia Rugby Clubrooms was perfectly timed given the announcement the following day that all Southland farmers would require a certified farm plan that met the Southland Water and Land Plan by mid-2026.

The farmers who participated in the workshops are now about 75 percent through completion of a farm plan to meet regional plan requirements. Some will also complete additional modules to meet New Zealand Farm Assurance Program Plus (NZFAP Plus) certification.

The farm planning workshops address topics such as freshwater management, biodiversity, biosecurity, winter grazing, and greenhouse gas management.

The workshops were co-sponsored by DINZ, Ballance and Rabobank, reducing the cost of compiling a plan from an estimated \$5,000 - \$10,000 (depending on farm system and size) to \$150 for each participating farm.

“There will be add-on costs for some, especially on larger scale farming operations, but this catchment group workshop approach is significantly cheaper,” Ballance Agri-Nutrients Farm Sustainability Services Manager Peter Thomas says.

“It’s a huge cost saving to farmers, but also the group learning process has given them a good understanding of local requirements and more ownership of the plan they’ve developed.”

The three workshops provided an overview of the purpose of a farm plan and how it is developed to meet various requirements before delving into the practical details, such as how to set up enterprise details and explain the farm story; how to use land units mapping; how to assess risk from a certifier’s perspective; how to develop actions as part of a farm plan, and how to use the QCONZ system to build an electronic freshwater farm plan.

The catchment group approach to completing the individual farm plans has been a win-win for all parties. Farmers saw the need to get a plan sooner rather than later, and for Ballance it meant they could support more farmers with less resources, Thomas said.

The Waikaia catchment comprises about 12 farms ranging in size from 30 – 65,000ha, and includes about four farms with deer. Catchment group chair Dave Pinckney, also a deer farmer, said catchment members were adamant that they wanted a practical group learning forum to help them complete their individual farm plans, and the workshops had fulfilled that wish.

“The interesting thing is that nearly everyone who came along to the first workshop came along to the two that followed.”

He said farmers appreciated guidance around the use of the QCONZ system.

“The Ballance facilitators had expert knowledge on using it, which was a great help to us in learning to navigate it,” Pinckney says.

The farm planning workshops are an applied use of the Integrated Farm Planning Acceleration Fund from MPI. DINZ received \$700,000, to be used by early 2026, to build awareness among deer farmers of IFPs and help them successfully complete a plan. Waikaia was the third partnership-run event facilitated by the Ballance farm sustainability team. There are other planned workshops in Greater Wellington, Gore and Te Anau to be run in early 2025, with other locations being considered.

Farmer feedback about the workshops has been positive, Project Manager Molly Kennedy says.

“It’s allowed farmers to come together, complete compliance requirements and get the job done and dusted, and they’ve been perfectly timed with the recent announcements of completion deadlines.”

There’s scope to run workshops to help with building or refreshing other types of farm plans, such as animal health and welfare or biosecurity, and she encourages farmers to get in touch where they want workshop support.

“We have the money, and we want to spend it in a practical way to help deer farmers. We’re happy to develop programmes alongside farmer needs, drawing on local facilitators and expertise.”

For more information and register for a workshop go to: www.deernz.org/deer-hub/farm-planning ■



HEADS DOWN: Waikaia catchment farmers at the third and final farm planning workshop.

Malignant Catarrhal Fever

Samantha Elder

Historically Malignant Catarrhal Fever (MCF) was a major cause of sudden death in deer, but it's less common now. However, sporadic cases of MCF still occur, and it's a frustrating disease because a) there is no cure, and b) often the only warning is a dead deer, and chances are it will be one of your best velvetting stags!

MCF is a virus caused by sheep-associated ovine herpes virus-2 (OHV-2), which affects deer and cattle. The virus is shed by sheep and is transmitted to deer orally or nasally, or from contaminated grazing sites.

Some deer species are more susceptible to MCF; fallow are resistant, and wapiti are considered slightly more resistant to the disease than red deer.

MCF generally affects mature stags although it sometimes strikes weaners but is less prevalent than the diseases that typically affect young deer, such as yersiniosis, parasitism, and Johne's. These diseases are all readily transmissible whereas MCF is a 'dead end' condition, meaning that deer do not shed the infective virus and pass it on to other deer.

MCF manifests in forms ranging from peracute (very acute) to chronic disease. In the peracute form, infected animals may die with no prior clinical signs. The most common progression is a very rapid onset of bloody diarrhoea, fever, dark stained urine, and death within 48 hours. In chronic cases, the affected deer may develop the 'head and eye' form of the disease, which is the type normally seen in cattle. The early stages of a chronic infection is characterised by opacity (milky-looking eyes), ulcers around the nose and mouth, conjunctivitis, congestion of the mucous membranes, excessive salivation, lacrymation (excessive secretion of tears) and nasal discharge. The tell-tale early physical signs of MCF are an initial dullness and lethargy, followed by incoordination and hyperaesthesia (excessive physical sensitivity).

"There's a common saying, 'If the animal gets better, it didn't have MCF.'"

There are tests available to confirm MCF in deer, but there is no effective treatment, hence the common saying "If the animal gets better, it didn't have MCF."

Where possible, suspected MCF deer deaths should be investigated by your vet. Often a farmer's suspicions and diagnosis is correct based on the tell-tale signs - sudden death in late winter/early spring of a mixed-age stag with a dirty rear end. However, those same presenting factors in a dead weaner could indicate Johne's, parasitism, or yersiniosis, and a timely investigation and post mortem could prevent a disease outbreak situation.

There is no preventative vaccine for MCF. Instead control is about reducing risk factors. Stress plays a major role in the development of disease, and evidence and research over the years shows that the incidence of MCF rises in winter/spring, a time when

conditions are harsh, and deer may be in light condition. Reducing the likelihood of stress through good nutrition, good shelter during bad weather and adequate paddock space are well-known preventative management strategies. However, the practicalities of implementing these measures is often easier said than done if, for example, at the end of winter or start of spring, stock are still grazing crop and there's little or no grass on which to spread them out. Another important management point is to avoid grazing deer with or in close proximity to sheep. If possible, don't graze weaned lambs with deer or in the pasture directly before deer (especially adult stags).

In conclusion, MCF is a 'dead end' disease in more ways than one! The best advice is to be vigilant, especially over late winter and early spring and call in a vet if in doubt. ■

Samantha Elder is a Southland vet.



Boost returns from venison farming

The rise of the elk meat market is an opportunity to increase venison returns by growing heavier hybrid yearlings over a longer time frame, but there are conditions attached, elk breeder Dave Lawrence says.

A number of processors are now offering schedules above \$10/kg for venison yearlings, unrestricted by weight or season, and this is a realistic opportunity for many venison farmers.

DINZ data for an average red venison animal is an average kill date of mid-January for a return of just under \$500/hd. Mating an elk bull to that same red hind will return \$770/hd by mid-January but grown through the autumn is capable of yielding a 95kg+ carcass for a return of \$1000/hd (see 'Seasonal average daily growth rate by venison finishing system' (deernz.org.nz/assets/Deer-Hub/Feeding/2022-Venison-production-Poster-v1.pdf))

Mountain River Venison has been marketing product from these larger carcasses into North America for many years now. All processors have now recognised the opportunity within a market that's familiar with elk meat and eat it year round, which is a huge bonus for us as producers.

In the past, it has always seemed counterintuitive for deer farmers using elk/wapiti terminal sires to produce hybrid weaners for slaughter at 10 months old. By the start of September, they have grown to 105kg and are about to hit their optimal spring growth about the same time we send them for slaughter.

Introducing elk or wapiti sires to produce heavier hybrid progeny to earn you more money sounds all too easy, but there are 'conditions attached' to achieving success. A good weaning percentage is crucial, and there are some horror stories about reproductive (or lack thereof) performance, but historical studies and extensive surveys (DeerMaster and DeerSouth) indicate no significant differences to the result of red x red mating should be expected. Also, despite the obvious difference in size between sire and dam, the anecdotal evidence over many years is that losses at birth from calving/dystocia are not an issue. Invariably when things have not ended up well, it's due to management.

Mating

There's a misconception that wapiti/elk suffer 'performance anxiety'. This happens if they are not managed correctly. The key points to bear in mind are:

- Elk/wapiti sires should be three-years or older.
- The single sire mating ratio should not exceed a 1:40.
- In multi-sire mating use a ratio of 1:33, and if three-year-old bulls are used, don't have them running with older bulls.
- Don't run mating mobs in adjacent paddocks.
- Keep red stags well away from elk/wapiti mating mobs.
- Observe for normal rutting behaviour and if not seen, intervene.

Animal health

The care of elk/wapiti sires post-mating is crucial. It's pretty obvious when mating is over (usually by Anzac weekend), at which time elk/wapiti bulls should be removed from mating mobs and drenched. A product effective for Ostertagia is crucial – Cervidae Oral is ideal. They should then be fed on quality saved pasture and supplemented if necessary for targeting the month of May before winter starts.

Also, remember to quarantine drench any bought-in sire. If the source farm of your elk/wapiti sire has a breed value for CARLA, be sure to use this to your benefit.

Feeding

Hybrid weaners have a huge genetic potential to grow to heavier weights over an extended time period but will only do so if enough quality feed is provided. Aim for post grazing residuals of 1500kgDM.

Obviously to optimise the potential hybrid growth and subsequent return means having them on farm longer, and there is also a cost in the additional feed requirement of a hind raising a hybrid fawn. See Deer Facts: Terminal sires for profitable venison production (deernz.org.nz/assets/Deer-Facts/Terminal-Sires-V4-Web.pdf) for more information.

Hybrid weaners have a huge genetic potential to grow to heavier weights provided enough quality feed is offered.

In summary, growing out hybrid deer for longer to capitalise on the extra returns will require changes and incur some extra costs to a venison system but foresight and management tweaks can significantly increase venison returns. ■

What qualifies as elk meat?

Venison processors have different criteria, and you should be familiar with their requirements. In terms of genetics, the lowest company criteria I have seen is 25% elk genes.

Elk/Wapiti terminal sires come in all sorts of guises in New Zealand – they can be Fiordland wapiti, F1, B11, NZ wapiti or elk. To safeguard yourself as a producer, it's strongly recommended that the percentage of elk genetics of whatever you buy is confirmed through a gBreed analysis from your breeder. The percentage, which ranges from 40% to mid-90%, means you can confidently certify stock you are sending to slaughter.

Venison beating bison meat?

By Phil Stewart, *Deer Industry News* writer

Venison is more beneficial than bison meat on a range of measures, according to a preliminary study by AgResearch's Smart Foods and Bioproducts Group.¹

The main thrust of the study was to compare the nutritional and bioactive potential of farmed venison from young deer (under 3 years of age) and mature (over 3 years) stags. Existing data on bison meat, which is claimed to be a lot healthier than beef, was used as a baseline for comparison with the two classes of venison.

Bison meat sells at a premium in the US, which is a real focus for the New Zealand venison industry under the North American Retail Accelerator (NARA) project.

The study found that overall venison outperformed bison meat in terms of amino acids (a proxy for protein quality and content), concentrations of polyunsaturated fats (important for skin and hair growth, bone health, metabolism, anti-inflammatory response among others), and some vitamins and minerals. For example, the amino acid taurine – essential for cardiovascular and muscle function, neurological development, eye health and immune function – was notably higher in venison than other meats.

When the researchers drilled down and analysed the venison from young deer and older stags, some interesting differences emerged. These qualities could eventually be used to tweak venison marketing to different consumer submarkets, in a similar way that different benefits of velvet (memory function, growth, athletic performance and others) are targeted at specific groups.

Stag shoulder venison, for example, could be recommended for older adults, the researchers said. This was by virtue of its rich content of essential B vitamins, zinc and selenium, combined with lower cholesterol levels than found in venison from younger deer.

Venison from younger deer, by contrast, could be pitched towards younger adults leading healthy and active lives. The cuts from younger venison contained high levels of polyunsaturated fats (including beneficial omega-3 fatty acids), higher levels than are found in bison meat.

Mineral content, especially zinc – great for immune function and cellular health, not to mention your sense of taste and smell – was higher in venison than bison meat. Levels were somewhat higher in the stag venison, making it potentially more valuable for older humans. Both types of venison were also better than bison meat for magnesium, phosphorus and selenium.

While the results from this pilot study are promising, the authors warn that recommendations can only be provisional. This is because the animal sample size was small, and some factors that can affect venison quality, such as gender, time of year and source, weren't known in detail. "We cannot assume that a single animal [represents] its age class across New Zealand farmed deer." They said the recommendations should be viewed as preliminary insights. ■



¹Thum C, Zhang R, Bernstein D (2024) Pilot Study – Nutritional potential from farm-raised venison of young animals and mature stags. Report for DINZ, study ID 12402

Industry champ moves on

Lynda Gray *Deer Industry News* editor

Jamie Ward's wide-ranging scientific and practical expertise will be sorely missed by the deer industry.

That's the clear-cut message from colleagues following announcement of his resignation from AgResearch in November, all acknowledging his genuine passion and support at many levels for New Zealand deer farming.

"He's flown the flag for deer farming for such a long time and well beyond his professional capacity," NZDFA chair Mark McCoard says.

"The passion of deer scientists such as Jamie has been integral in building our industry."

"The passion of deer scientists such as Jamie has been integral in building our industry."

McCoard said that Ward was first and foremost a deer scientist but had also made valuable contributions as a DFA branch member and latterly on the NZDFA executive committee.

"He was brilliant because he had a genuine passion for deer farming and brought a different perspective, which was invaluable when we were looking at various issues."

Ward's career at Invermay covered all things deer, including farming systems, genetics, welfare, disease, nutrition, antler and reproduction. A Google search of scholarly published articles authored or co-authored by him points to his vast science-related knowledge, covering specialist topics 'Adaptive Array Processing for Radar' (1996); population genetics 'Procedures for large scale DNA pedigree matching' (2001); to applied and practical science such as 'Relationships between deer temperament and production traits' (2019), 'Wearable technology for deer' (2024) and 'Stream health and water quality in hill-and high-country deer farms' (2024).

His segue to deer was the newly established Genomnz lab where he was employed in 1996 to extract DNA from blood samples. In a 2019 *Otago Daily Times* story, Ward said most of the lab's clientele were deer breeders, many of whom he got to know. After seven years, a job came up with the deer systems team, with a genetics focus.

He played a key role in the three-year Deer Progeny Test (DPT), a particularly challenging piece of work given the complexity of data measured, former AgResearch deer programme leader Geoff Asher says.

"It was a massive job accumulating the data, managing it, and making sure it was all valid, and I don't know if we would ever have got there if it hadn't been for Jamie."

The DPT strengthened the whole genetic base of the national herd and became the backbone of Deer Select, he says.

"It (DPT) demonstrated the real impact and value of genetic improvement."

Deer Select manager Sharon McIntyre worked with Ward in

managing and delivering the DPT and follow-up programmes. She enjoyed his optimistic, outgoing nature and his professionalism.

"The joint efforts of Jamie, breeders and I, have maintained connectedness and therefore comparable breed values across most venison production herds, both red and wapiti, since 2012," she says.

He was also a leading force in development of the CARLA breed value, identifying sires who produce an antibody protecting them against internal parasites.

The concept of 'connectedness' extends to Ward's relationship with scientists in the global deer and ruminant livestock community. He was well respected and his links had helped progress the full sequencing of NZ's red deer genome, colleague Dave Lawrence says.

"That's amounted to huge savings in time and money in the genome mapping project, which will bring huge benefits to the industry in areas such as disease prevention and animal health."

McIntyre and Lawrence both mention Ward's skill at explaining science according to the knowledge level and interests of the various groups he worked alongside.

"He can pitch technical and scientific subjects at different levels. He has a layered approach to communication, starting out with the simple messages but willing and able to add more science and detail if and as required," Lawrence says.

Ward's talents and expertise will be sorely missed but deer industry colleagues and friends hope he won't become a stranger and will be enticed back for project work.

Thanks Jamie for all your work and all the best for the future. ■



MULTI TALENTED: Departing AgResearch scientist and deer farming advocate Jamie Ward.

A driving force

The final journey for Wayne (Ox) McEwan, on the back of 'Deerhunter' for a lap around Ascot raceway and a stop-off at Ryal Bush Transport (RBT), was a perfect and poignant send-off given his love of big trucks, deer, and harness racing.

Deerhunter, a 350hp Cummins-powered ERF, was the flagship of RBT's deer transport fleet, which moved thousands of deer throughout the country during the 1980s. McEwan recalled in the book 'In Hindsight: 50 years of deer farming in New Zealand', how he and off-sider Ronnie McDougall worked double shifts for weeks at a time doing inter-island deliveries of deer. Deerhunter clocked up 300,000 kilometres over 12 months on the long hauls, which took about 24 hours from Southland to Hawke's Bay.

"The idea was to keep going," McEwan explained.

"We also kept the truck on the outside deck on the ferry to keep the air circulating."

McEwan knew "bugger all" about deer when he started carting them throughout the wider Southland region. He quickly upskilled, however, as RBT expanded their trucking fleet to include specially adapted truck and trailer units for deer. He recalled how RBT converted a three-deck wooden sheep crate into a two-deck deer crate in 1978.

"One of the biggest things I learnt about deer was how stressed they could get, which is where the dark wooden crate came into its own because it wasn't as noisy as metal, and it really helped."

Friend and transport industry colleague John Tacon says McEwan had a genuine passion for both deer and transporting them safely. His practical knowledge and know-how led to his shoulder-tapping by the Game Industry Board (predecessor to Deer Industry New Zealand) in the late 1980s to help develop an industry-backed deer-quality-assurance transport programme. McEwan was a key member of a group that over three years developed the deer transport QA system. Many of the underlying principles and processes for the welfare and safe handling of deer were transferred into industry codes of practice.

"Ox's practical approach and steady leadership as the chairman of the Deer QA Transport Committee helped ensure the highest standards in deer welfare and transport to this day.

"His influence in the development of quality assurance standards is a legacy that will endure," Tacon says.

McEwan had a direct and effective leadership style, which occasionally led to heated encounters with Wellington bureaucrats. Tacon recalls on one occasion how transport operators were struggling to get their point across to MPI and animal welfare-related officials until McEwan fist thumped the table and spelled out in no uncertain terms what needed to happen to make a proposed regulation workable.

"They listened, and what he said was written into the code of welfare."

When he wasn't at the wheel or arranging the carting of deer, McEwan farmed them on a small block at Branxholme and also on a larger scale farm near Te Anau.

"He was passionate about deer and what came across at his funeral is that he was passionate about everything he did: transport, deer and racehorses," says Tacon.

McEwan's career was all about rural transport, starting out with truck driving and leading on to ownership of RBT (now run by son, Shannon) which eventually merged with the Richardson Group. He was a respected owner, breeder and trainer of harness racing horses and noted in a trackside.co.nz tribute was his significant contribution to the southern racing circuit.

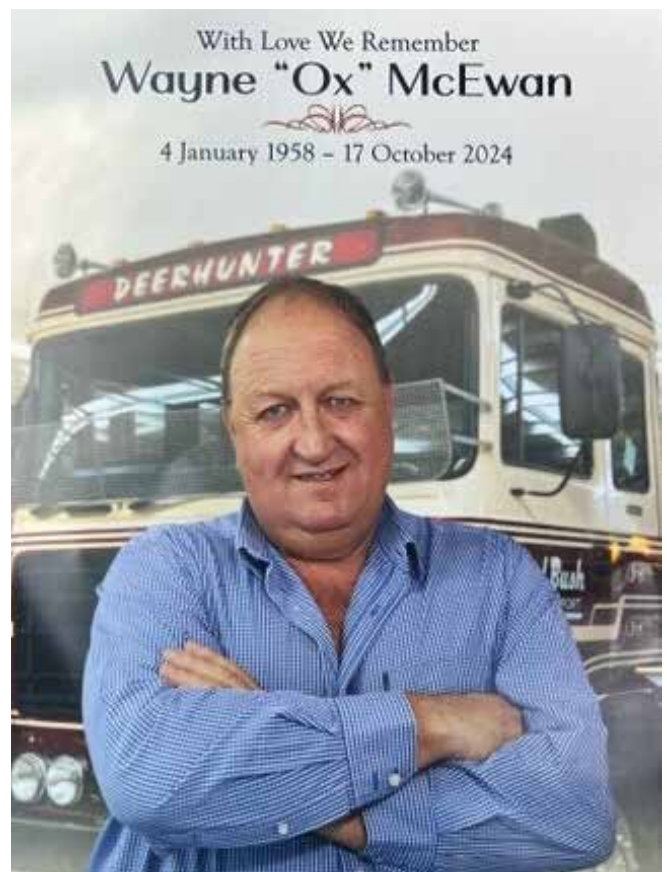
The wall-to-wall crowd who came to pay their respects at the funeral on 25 October at the Bill Richardson Transport World was testament to the high esteem in which he was held throughout the community. The Deerhunter procession concluding the service was an emotional and fitting finale, Tacon said.

"The casket was on the back of Deerhunter and other trucks followed it around Ascot then through town, finishing with a circuit around Ryal Bush Transport.

"The trucks were lined up in an arc with lights on and all the drivers were standing in front of them.

"There was lots of emotion and pride. It was one of those amazing days." ■

The deer industry celebrates Ox McEwan's contributions, mourns his passing, and passes on sincere condolences to his family.



BIG LOSS: Wayne (Ox) McEwan was a deer transport pioneer.

Venison sausage roll wreath

Recipe courtesy of Merchant of Venison

These decadent venison sausage rolls will get rave reviews at your festive and New Year gatherings. The venison is wrapped in bacon for extra deliciousness. Serve with blueberry chutney.

Prep time: 1 hr | Chilling time: 2 hrs | Cook time: 35 minutes



Ingredients

Puff pastry

350 g plain flour

175 g unsalted butter chilled and cut into small cubes

Venison mix

500 g New Zealand farm raised venison mince

1 tbsp rosemary finely chopped

1 tbsp sage finely chopped

½ cup walnuts chopped

1 tbsp olive oil

3 shallots finely diced

2 cloves garlic diced

Pinch salt

1 cup ice cold water as needed

½ cup bread crumbs

½ cup milk

1 egg

1 tsp salt

250 g thin sliced streaky bacon

1 egg

6
SERVES

Method

1. For the puff pastry: place flour, butter and salt in in food processor and using the blender attachment pulse a few times to break the butter into small balls. With the blender running, very slowly pour in the water (you may not use it all) until the mix just starts to form a ball.
2. Turn the dough out onto a floured bench. Knead lightly, adding flour if needed. With a floured rolling pin, roll out to a rectangle shape. Fold the furthest edge into the centre, then the closest edge into the centre. Turn the dough 90 degrees, roll out again, then fold edges into the centre. Wrap in cling film and refrigerate for 1 hour. Repeat this step again, then refrigerate for another hour.
3. Meanwhile, make the venison mix: heat oil in a large non-stick frying pan over medium heat. Add the shallots, garlic, rosemary, and sage and cook until softened. Leave to cool. In a bowl add breadcrumbs and milk, stir well. Add mix and all remaining ingredients to a large bowl and combine well. Place in the freezer for five minutes, to firm up.
4. Preheat the oven to 220°C. Line an oven baking tray with baking paper.
5. On a floured bench, roll out the chilled pastry into a long rectangle. Lay bacon rashers along the pastry then place venison mince in a line down the middle. Whisk an egg and brush the pastry edges with egg wash, then roll to enclose.
6. Place the sausage roll onto the baking tray, seam-side-down and make into a ring. Join the ends together with egg wash. Cut into the pastry to make small sausage rolls – cutting from the outside towards the middle, leaving the pastry in the middle of the ring intact. Twist each a little. Brush the pastry with remaining egg wash, then bake for 30-35 minutes, until golden and cooked.
7. Serve with blueberry chutney. ■



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