

Working, playing and growing grass

Tatua suppliers Bruce and Donna Arnold have increased their farm's milk production from 1000 kilograms of milk solids (MS)/ha to more than 1867kg MS/ha. And now they are applying the same farming knowhow to a bigger operation this season.

Winners of the medium input section of the Dairy Business of the Year Competition, they attribute their Tatuani farms' outstanding profitability last season of \$4398/ha, as measured by Red Sky Agricultural, to their good staff, true condition scoring of the cows, sound advice from consultants and "growing grass".

Setting the Arnold system apart is an operating profit five times the Waikato dairy farm average of \$780/ha and double the average for the region's top 10 percent of dairy farms.

It's mainly because their 347 Friesian and Friesian-cross herd is averaging 468kg MS/cow while the Waikato average is 358kg MS/cow on 87 effective ha.

They get fresh breaks of 2700kg to 2800kg DM/ha of pasture and also feed on 2-4kg of maize silage and palm kernel/cow on the feedpad in the afternoons to work as a buffer in the rumen, said Bruce. He was happy to see his cows leave 1800 kg DM/ha behind as residual cover.

But on the advice of Andy Collier, of Intelact, they now have to eat that down to 1600kg to 1700kg/ha.

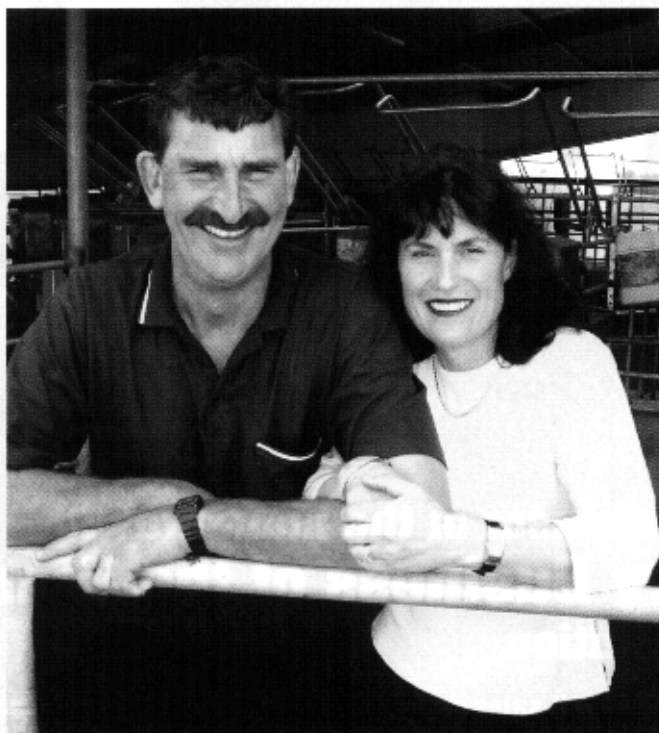
"We like to see them fully fed."

Low empties

One indicator of cow health is a herd's empty rate, which last year was just 8.5 percent. Around one third of the herd are CIDR for a more compact calving.

Red Sky's analysis shows 16.6 tonnes of dry matter/ha being harvested, which is significantly more than the Waikato dairy pasture average of 12.2t DM/ha. The top 10 percent of farms average 14t DM/ha.

"Pasture has always grown well in this area," said Bruce.



Bruce and Donna Arnold at the new rotary dairy.

He grew up on his father's Morrinsville farm and after three years in Australia working as a welder, returning to start contract milking at the age of 20.

Their first farm was 33ha, bought when Bruce and Donna were just married, in their mid-20s. They then leased an adjoining area of Bruce's parents' farm and three years later bought a neighbour's 20ha. After five years, in 2000, a previously leased runoff of 27ha was purchased and in 2003 the balance of his parents' farm.

The Arnolds are now applying their proven system of semi-intensive dairying on a bigger scale after buying the farm next door.

"Our new house was completed just six months before our neighbour offered us the opportunity to buy their farm," Donna said. "We had to go for it and the bank was confident we could make it pay."

She's a former bank worker, now responsible for the farm's financial records.

Bruce said the day after his neighbour's visit he arranged for a local builder to schedule a

new dairy construction and then set about arranging finance for the 66ha property.

The new dairy is a 50-bail Westfalia external rotary. It's still to be decided whether to install a herd recording system from Westfalia, LIC or another competitor.

Whichever is chosen, Bruce and Donna will have carefully considered the options, as demonstrated by their track record in integrating extra land into today's 156ha unit.

Their latest expansion has required realignment of fences and, on Collier's advice, the concrete feedpad was extended to feed 420 cows near the new dairy to minimise wastage of maize, silage and palm kernel supplements that make up 23 percent of the cows' diet.

Forage cost

According to Red Sky's analysis their forage cost last season was too high and Bruce has decided to buy no more grass silage and instead concentrate on maize, growing more of the crop themselves.

He is planning to maize-crop most of the 27ha run-off after their 150 heifers have been grazed off. The extra feed will be required to build the farm's stocking rate back up to 4 cows/ha, the herd being increased to 620 cows.

Previously a trustee of Tatuani School, Bruce, 46, and his family are keen golfers and whether you're talking sport or farming he believes it's usually a good idea to listen to expert advisers who can improve your game "and get you motivated".



Donna and Bruce Arnold with their children Kurt, 13, Carlie, 9, and Todd, 15.