Regenerative farmers: Janette Perrett

The Perrett farm lies in a beautiful valley at Marua, east of Hikurangi. The 85 hectares of dairy paddocks (65 hectares effective) are on flats and rolling hill country, with 60 hectares for young stock on steeper hill country. The Perretts are a rare breed – sharemilking organic farmers. They invest a lot of time and energy caring for land without the benefit of assured long-term tenure. Thankfully they have a ten-year contract on this farm. The benefits of their regenerative approach are already evident after four seasons. They are contracted to milk a minimum of 170 cows – a high stocking rate for a regenerative farm.

Figure 1: The dairy herd on Marua hills.

The Perretts are still registered with BioGro. They were first certified in 2006 but have not yet sought certification on this farm. Janette and her daughter Carla set out on that journey together. In her book You Have Been Given a Gift Janette writes:

We said farewell to chemical fertilisers, antibiotics and a bucketful of ‘cides’; insecticides, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. We were not going to kill anymore. We were going to walk alongside mother nature and learn her ways much as possible (page 58).

Pasture and soil

Above the flats the soil is pretty typical Northland hill country soil, with a high clay content and plenty of rotten rock. Kikuyu is dominant and while it is great in a dry summer, it is slow to get going in the spring. Janette has had a steep learning curve in attempts to diversify pasture in Northland conditions. She has sown cocksfoot, chicory, clover and rye, but results are patchy. She has noticed that chicory sown in the spring doesn’t appear in pasture until autumn, but diversity is slowing
increasing. Next spring she will undersow perennial rye, oats and possibly chicory. Soil structure is improving evidenced by less puddling in wet conditions. Other pasture species present are plantain, lotus major, wild carrot, red and white clover. There is not a lot of dock, but where is grows it’s taproot breaks the pan and the cattle enjoy it.

Before the Perretts arrived, weeds were controlled with herbicides. They grubbed thistles and ragwort, achieving effective control. Their pastures look very clean. The farmer owners, watching their hard work, were surprised that grubbing and biodynamic treatments were more effective than chemical control – the weeds didn’t re-establish in the same numbers they did with herbicides. Janette believes that plants, including weeds, serve a purpose in accumulating nutrients and pasture has successions similar to those of any natural ecosystem. For example, daisies accumulate potassium, and plantain accumulates silica. The cows appreciate the diversity and enjoy the pampas growing in a harvested forestry block.

Fertilisers are all organic. They purchase products from Agrisea, but Janette brews her own EM (effective micro-organisms) and fish and seaweed fertiliser. Biodynamic preparations are added to the mix which brews for at least six months. Four years after conventional chemical use ceased, the Perretts notice more biodiversity – more birds and now frogs have moved back to the property. Janette recalls that the first time her dog encountered a truckload of organic fertiliser, he began eating it!

When they moved onto the farm they milked once a day, and shifted to 16 hours and then twelve hours. Milking twice a day provided more pasture and the cows only grazed for 12 hours enabling the pasture to re-establish more rapidly. Janette observed that the cows ate the clover and were then attracted to the clover’s new shoots as it attempted to regenerate. They have now returned to milking once a day in the morning and shifting the herd to a fresh paddock in the afternoon.
Animal health

The Perretts have had the current herd for 30 years, and the herd had an Artificial Breeding history of four decades when it was purchased 30 years ago. The cows are Jersey Fresian crosses. Apart from a little liver fluke the cows are healthy and there is no need for vets or animal pharmaceuticals. The Perretts use homeopathics, on the stock and are getting pleasing results experimenting with essential oils. Biodynamic preparations also support improved soil and animal health. Somatic cell counts in milk are low and no antibiotics have been used on the herd for 12 years.

Figure three: Janette’s EM brews

To be able to administer the correct homeopathic solution the correct diagnosis is very important. Ultimately we found ourselves reading the animals with so much more empathy and awareness of the situation that requires treatment. For Mastitis we now had several solutions we could use depending on the description of the mastitis at the time. There was no ‘one jab fits all’ regime like we were used to. We now had to look and feel all the symptoms: her temperature, what side she lay on, was she eating, was the udder cold, how is she walking, did the symptoms appear suddenly? We learned to paint a picture of the disease and look at the cause as well as symptoms (You Have Been Given a Gift, pages 59 to 60).

The market

The farm produces excellent milk, evidenced in the 2017-18 season with a certificate for having no demerit points. Unfortunately, they miss out on a $2.00 plus premium for organic milk because Fonterra don’t provide a separate collection for organic milk north of Whangarei – another reason to
have independent processing facilities. Alternately, Fonterra might increase the collection range when more organic milk is available and demand continues to grow. It is likely that in the near future Fonterra will pay a bonus for milk with a low FEI (fat evaluation index). The Perretts score “A” as they don’t use palm kernel.

Because of their contract, the Perretts are carrying more stock than they would choose to. But they are proving that dairy farms can stock at over two cows per hectare and pursue regenerative farming that builds the soil, protects the environment and produces healthy milk and meat.

**Life-long learning**

When I walked around the farm with Janette her love for the land and her animals is evident. Janette is committed to a life long journey as a farmer having already spent over 45 years in the dairy industry. She reflects deeply on farming practice and has captured her learning in her book *You Have Been Given a Gift*. I get the impression she is learning as intensely now as when she first started farming.

As I meet more regenerative farmers my admiration for them grows. Janette brings all of her senses, her intelligence and intuition to her work. She talks about the sweet smell of the soil beneath scotch thistles, accepting they have a role in healing the land (while not accepting their presence). She writes about the way cream whips and what that tells her about animal health. It is perhaps in the realm of animal health where regenerative farmers are most impressive. They are responsible for the health of hundreds of animals, but choose not to use “off the shelf” pharmaceuticals”. Janette uses homeopathics – a process that science cannot yet explain, but through patient trial, error and observation she has learned what works and keeps her animals healthy, fully aware that healthy animals provide higher quality milk and meat.