

Meet the mulards

*From troubles of the world
I turn to ducks,
Beautiful, comical things*
—FW Harvey

writer and photographer Fiona Stocker

If only FW Harvey's celebrated poem had seen the potential of ducks for the table as well as their farmyard appeal, his lines could have been written for the owner of Strelleyfield Pastured Duck farm, Matt Crane.

When Crane goes onto the farm to check on his free-range flock, he strides across grassy paddocks, gumboots flapping around his calves, with Jay, the "world's laziest kelpie", cavorting alongside him.

But for 10 years it wasn't paddocks but warehouses teeming with chickens that Crane waded

through, as manager of industrial scale poultry farms first in Campania and then South Australia. What drew him into that industry was its consistency and lack of vulnerability to all the forces which typically persecute farmers – drought, fluctuating commodity prices, escalating costs. Chicken meat is grown for a steady domestic market, and poultry farms are run meticulously with high-tech infrastructure, with costs for the most part remaining stable.

Having been raised on a traditional mixed farm, where income was dependent upon the





Matt Crane

success or failure of a crop and the kindness of the season, the reliability and economic viability of poultry farming had a definite appeal for Crane. As the early years of his career ticked by, however, it became clear to him that the real costs of that industry were born by the livestock. He calculated that on average each bird received 13 seconds of his time during its entire brief life. It was, he says, “punching out widgets” rather than living with or farming animals. With little meaningful interaction between farmer and birds, it was soulless routine.

What troubled him further was the bigger picture, in which automation of the food supply chain left the consumer free to “consume with abandon”, forgetting about the sacrifices made by

the animals themselves. It was, he came to feel, an affluence that we take largely for granted.

Over the years Matt Crane grew keen to run a different kind of farming business for himself, one that was sustainable and had good farming ethics as well as economics at its core. Raising animals outdoors, he believes, is an innately good way to spend one’s time, connecting us to nature, the earth and the cycle of life.

It wasn’t a large step from chickens to ducks. Whilst Crane had no direct experience of them, he assumed that if he could “grow half a million chickens”, a few thousand ducks was within reach. All duck meat in Tasmania at the time was imported frozen, with none farmed free range or sold fresh on the island. Duck, he felt, would be sought after



in the island's burgeoning food culture and would complement its wine. Tasmania's cool climate is favourable for duck farming, and the premium price attracted by the end product makes a niche farming operation viable.

It was a perfect combination of all the factors Crane sought.

Here, fate took over. Moving back to Tasmania, Matt Crane stepped in to manage a small livestock feed company outside Launceston, where the owner offered him quarters in a ramshackle farmhouse – which had “no front door, no back door, and a mob of sheep living in it” – and the lease on some land in the breezy landscape between Launceston and Evandale. Sloping paddocks protected by hawthorn hedges provided shade

and shelter, while the winds which often scour the plains between Mount Lomond and the Western Tiers offered natural ventilation.

Almost on a whim, Crane purchased a first batch of ducklings from Victoria. Growing these and breeding more, he measured how much they ate and charted growth rates. Those bred on the farm fared better than those imported, he noticed, most likely because they hadn't experienced the stress of being flown across the Bass Strait as cargo when just a few days old.

Over the past two years, he has scaled up to a flock of 120 breeding birds, a mix of peking and muscovy. These he cross-breeds for mulards, a French tradition which produces a hardy, calm-natured duck with natural hybrid vigour.



As we stroll across small paddocks between old sheds, ducks quack amiably and scoot about. A hosepipe with fogger attachment creates a cooling mist for them in the summer sun. Those under five weeks are housed in shelters made of aluminium, and shade cloth and “twenty bucks worth of screws”. Here they are protected from crows, and the shelters, mounted on sleds, are towed to fresh pasture every few days.

One corner of an old shearing shed is now occupied by hatchery pens, where chicks spend their first few days on local wood shavings in a pool of yellow light, warmed by a heater. These creatures are at the far end of the spectrum from those birds that had just 13 seconds of the farmer’s time. The chicks at Strelleyfield come to recognise Crane and follow him around for their first week. After that, he says, “something clicks

in their tiny brains and, like teenagers, they no longer want you around”.

An industrial-scale incubator the size of a small truck roars away in another corner, with its precious cargo of eggs and hatchlings. Crane bends and pulls out a drawer, revealing a tray of eggs. Some are half cracked with a beak and feathers protruding, some topped by damp newly-hatched chicks who are fluffing up their feathers and taking stock.

A breeding duck lays about 150 eggs per year, and as many as possible must be collected from the laying boxes and hatched in the incubator to make the operation viable. To a non-farmer, it may seem preferable to let the mother duck sit on her eggs and hatch them herself. Whilst this is something to be desired in the pages of a Beatrix Potter story, it is not a viable option on a working farm. It takes 28 days to

hatch an egg, during which a duck is unproductive, as most domesticated birds sitting eggs become broody and cantankerous, and stop laying.

Most farmers who keep livestock have a keen concern about how they are handled at the end point of their lives. As a partner in a small farming business myself, I'm interested in the means by which Crane's ducks go to slaughter. Unsurprisingly, he has chosen to be present in every stage of the business including this one. Having been farmed by him, the ducks are used to his presence and this minimises stress. Currently, they are transported a short distance, and the process is carried out calmly and quietly, with each bird dispatched individually, then prepared and packaged by hand. This approach is typical of smallholder farming and could not be more of a contrast with what is known of mechanised, industrial-scale plants.

One advantage of processing them at a small facility, he says, is that it is immaculately clean. The ducks have lived outdoors on healthy, windswept pastures instead of in a high density shed, and are clean creatures themselves. This adds an undeniable integrity to the product, along with good shelf life and quality, he adds.

"Part of what you're buying when you buy from a committed small farmer like myself is the knowledge that the animals were treated with respect and care that there simply isn't time for on a factory farm."

It takes about five square metres per duck and a different mindset to farm free range on pasture, and the benefits are manifest on the plate. Research in Europe indicates that the flavour profile and omega nutrients are superior in grass-fed birds. The fat is noticeably richer and yellower. While Crane's ducks are fed a carefully devised grain feed, they supplement their diet by

foraging for insects, worms, grasses and clovers and this enhances their meat.

This is like manna from heaven for chefs, and Strelleyfield ducks have appeared on the menu at Ettie's in Hobart, the Agrarian Kitchen's twice-hatted Eatery and Launceston's Terrace Restaurant. "It's exciting for us to finally have great Tasmanian duck to serve," says the Agrarian Kitchen's Rodney Dunn, who glazes them with honey and hot smokes them for his restaurants and his own table at home.

Orders from festivals such as Dark Mofu and Taste, which showcase the island's produce and eschew imported ingredients, have made a tangible difference to Strelleyfield's start-up phase. The birds are also stocked by some butchers, and can be bought direct from Crane at Harvest Launceston farmers' market, where he quietly spreads the word about pekings and muscovies, the business of farming free range and making it viable, and his new life as a gentleman farmer.

From the troubles of the world, Crane turned to ducks and was reborn in a venture of great quality. And on airy farmland down a track south of Launceston, his ducks are just as FW Harvey described:

*Triangular and clear
They leave their curious track
In mud at the water's edge,
And there amid the sedge
And slime they gobble and peer
Saying 'Quack! quack!'*

