



Left: Farmer Harold Melis says the organic feed and access to the outdoors are key elements in creating top quality chicken meat.

From the paddock gate, the chickens appear as a mass of white; a convivial crowd gathered in the sunshine outside their shed at Kipdale Farms. As we approach, however, there is a mad dash for the safety of indoors and they watch warily as we pass by.

"The shed is like the mother," Marieke Melis tells me later. "In summer we open the side doors, but they won't leave for a couple of days, then they build confidence."

These chickens have what a real estate agent would probably describe as "a property with all day sun, and great indoor/outdoor flow." Raised free-range and under certified organic practices, they call home one of three airy, specially designed sheds nestled in the Clevedon Valley, south of Auckland.

Marieke and husband Harold, a farmer and former butcher, have farmed chickens for more than a decade. First, in their homeland of Holland and now here. Tired of the intensive farming practices in Holland and in search of a better life, Harold and Marieke moved to New Zealand with their young family in late 2006.

They now own and run Kipdale Farms, producing free-range, certified organic chickens which are building a steady consumer following and already causing ripples in the restaurant scene: Tony Astle of Antoine's and Geoff Scott of Vinnies have just placed their orders, while Huka Lodge Executive Chef Michel Louws has been a fan for some time.

When they first arrived, Harold worked on a dairy farm milking buffalo for locals Helen and Richard Dorresteyn and their then-fledgling Clevedon Valley Buffalo company. Helen runs the Clevedon Farmers' Market, and knowing Harold's background in chicken farming and always in search of good quality local product, encouraged him to start his own free-range farm.

In 2009 Harold and Marieke began with

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free-range birds, but soon realised the definition of what constituted free-range production ("providing birds with access to an extensive outdoor area...") could be so widely interpreted that they would never be able to compete against some of the bigger players and their large scale operations.

"The public says, 'Free-range is free-range'," says Harold, "but they (the large companies) are farming on a much larger scale, so I could never survive with just free-range. Certified organic is a step higher and more of a point of difference. It's farming from your heart on one side, but it's also business."

So just months into production, Harold

applied for organic certification and also ordered three special movable sheds from France, the only ones of their kind currently used for commercial chicken farming in New Zealand.

Every seven to eight weeks Harold hooks the sheds up to a tractor and pulls them to new ground. This prevents the chickens polluting the ground, which can cause sickness, and gives them access to fresh foraging. The sides of the sheds open too, allowing fresh air and sunlight inside throughout the day.

Kipdale Farms achieved its organic certification earlier this year and Marieke says it has helped them create a product they are proud to stand behind.

"It has to do with integrity too, for me, that's why I like this product so much. As certified organic you aren't allowed to wash the birds in chemicals, for example. You do that with a natural citrus spray and then you think 'Yes, this is the real deal.'"

The chicks arrive at Kipdale Farms from a hatchery in Tuakau. They are housed in a temperature-controlled shed until they are old enough to be moved into the open

sheds. They are fed a certified organic feed of maize, wheat, soya and barley, and Marieke says this has a significant effect on the flavour of the bird. "They taste different because the feed they get is certified organic without sprays. Other chickens can be fed blood and bone from slaughter plants – these chickens are vegetarians, blood and bone is not allowed."

Once they reach just over two weeks old they are moved to the open sheds; each 8 metre x 15 metre shed houses 600 birds, allowing plenty of room to move, which also plays a role in the final product. The meat of Kipdale Farms' chickens is slightly darker



The imported sheds at Kipdale Farms open at the sides to give the chickens easy access to the outdoors, and can also be moved to fresh ground, preventing pollution of their living area.

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and denser, a result of the bird's higher blood flow as it moves around.

"Because they are going out, they grow more slowly because they lose energy," explains Harold. "They are not so fat and the chicken has good blood flow, then the meat gets tighter; if it grows like a balloon, then the meat is really soft.

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When the chickens are grown, they are each picked up by hand (this helps avoid bruising) and sent to Tuakau for processing, before they are returned to Clevedon and the certified organic kitchen the Melis' use.

"That's so we can check all the birds again," explains Harold, "It's such a high quality product and people are paying quite some money for it and so we want to be sure it's good quality. So we check them

all again and then we package them."

The couple's children help out with the family business too – gathering the birds and packaging.

The chickens are available in five sizes (12-20) in the North Island only currently, at organic stores such as Huckleberry Farms in Auckland, Commonsense Organics in Wellington and at the weekly Clevedon Farmers' Market.

While Harold's focus is on raising the birds, Marieke deals with retailers and restaurateurs, organizing orders, following up for feedback and selling to customers at the local market. She says she often has to explain where the birds come from, and recalls one customer asking if the man shown on the packaging was real. An indignant Marieke replied: "Of course – that's the farmer, that's my husband!"

We all know how it ends for the chickens, but for Harold and Marieke the quality of the birds' lives up until that point is as important as the end product.

"What I really enjoy is when the chickens are happy in the shed," says Harold. "The wood shavings are nice and dry and there's fresh air in the shed and they have a beautiful, comfortable climate and they jump around and I can watch this for hours.

"The other thing I enjoy, because I have a butcher's background, is that you have the day old chick to the plate – you control everything until it comes into the butcher's shop or the organics shops. That is great."

He says knowing that what they produce is the best it can be, also makes Marieke's job easier. "Now she can completely with her whole heart say 'This is a clean, beautiful piece of chicken meat.'"

Marieke nods in agreement, "This is real farming." ◻

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