



Where it all begins

We go down-to-earth with three of our FD farmers

Dave Tilley is a big believer in first-hand experience. He was never one to simply order produce from stock availability lists; he was interested in how things were grown and the people who grew them. He'd worked on a farm before coming to Alfalfa House as fruit+veg buyer in March last year and had always intended to see where we were getting our Farmer-Direct produce from. So on a crisp bright blue sky day in early August, Dave, his Mum and I headed up the Pacific Highway bound for Rollands Plains, home to three of the farms from whom we buy direct.

Rollands Plains is about 400kms north of Sydney, tucked away to the west of Wauchope on the mid-North Coast. It's long been regarded as lush, fertile country, typically beef and dairy farms. However, the drought has taken its toll. And while there has been quite a bit of rain lately, the long-range forecast isn't very encouraging. In fact, water's always on everyone's lips.

We visited Gary Branch's farm, Markira, first. Gary's sprawling 40 hectares used to be a dairy farm. He's been growing vegetables here for 12 years. His current crop includes fennel, bok choy, rocket, beetroot, mustard greens,



Dave (right) deep in conversation with Gary amongst the Russian garlic and the bok choy

rainbow chard, shallots, and broccolini. That will, of course change as the weather warms and it's time to plant tomatoes, baby bok choy, beans and herbs such as basil, coriander and parsley.

Apart from supplying Alfalfa House, Gary sells his produce mostly at the monthly farmers' market in Wauchope and he does up vege boxes for locals. He also collects seeds and markets them as Branch's Seeds, which we sell in the co-op. He says he's about 90 percent self-sufficient.

Gary has noticed a growing environmental awareness among local farmers, particularly as a result of the prolonged drought. He believes most have a deeper appreciation of organic farming and more and more are making the switch, although they may not have gone as far as getting certified.

Next it was on to Belinda Atkins' property, Miles Away. She's been here three years and grows radicchio, bok choy, radish, broccoli, cabbage, rocket, shallots, carrots and coriander. There's also a 15 year-old mandarin orchard. And of course, those remarkable triamble and jarrahdale pumpkins that we've been enjoying over the past couple of months. Miles Away used to be a (TO THE NEXT PAGE)

GROCERIES

what's new

- ▶ Dried blueberries, organic, from Canada
- ▶ Brown rice penne, organic and gluten-free, from Australia
- ▶ Raw + roasted pepitas, uncertified organic, from Queensland
- ▶ Split green peas, organic, from Australia
- ▶ Millet flour, organic, from Australia
- ▶ Lemon verbena, organic, from Egypt
- ▶ Sushi rice, organic, from Australia
- ▶ Organic felafel mix in bulk
- ▶ Dried pineapple, organic, from Mexico

Q. Where are the onions? A. They're sprouting.

Brown and Spanish onions (the red ones) are unavailable at the moment. Spring is when the onion family sprouts – they want to be planted and grow into new onions. Non-organically grown onions may be sprayed or irradiated, which destroys their ability to sprout. This, combined with cold storage, means they're available year-round. The good news is there are some members of the onion family out and about. If you miss the humble onion, why not embrace leeks and shallots, which are now at their best and plentiful.

– Dominika Grossy

NEWS FROM THE SUGGESTIONS BOX

Here are the latest suggestions (and replies) from the little wooden box near the breads.

▶ Green tea concentrate and stevia concentrate.

REPLY Both are currently not available in bulk, are packaged in plastic and imported. We restrict supplements to bulk only, partly because of limited shelf space.

▶ Dried powdered wild yam and bentonite clay.

REPLY We can get the wild yam. Members can make a personal order and we'll powder it for them. We'll investigate bentonite clay.

▶ Organic black turtle beans.

REPLY We'll investigate.

▶ Organic sprouting sunflower seeds.

REPLY They haven't been available for eight months, but as soon as they are we'll have them.

▶ Cleopatra's cream.

REPLY As the supply of Cleo's milk increases (as the weather warms), more will be available for other products. They're planning cheese next, perhaps cream will follow. We'll let you know.

▶ Asafoetida (spice used in Indian cuisine).

REPLY A chemical-free version is now in stock.

▶ Facial clays (red, yellow, pink etc).

REPLY We'll look into it (no pun intended).

▶ Fancy Pantz decorative jars.

REPLY We checked out the website. However, the ones we saw were pretty impractical and they are imported. Our current jars are locally made and we think they do the trick. – Lisa Durante

Where it all begins

(FROM PAGE 1) peach orchard, but all the trees got mould and died. Belinda also supplies the Beanstalk Food Co-op in Newcastle. We were especially impressed by her long, slender, sweet carrots. Food is such a sensuous delight!

After lunch at Belinda's, we ventured off to Al Parker's farm, literally at the end of the road. Al's farm, a share of a 120-hectare property known as Marlomirican, offers that rare sensation of feeling like you're away from it all. He's been here 15 years, the last six in drought, which has cut production by a third to half. He normally gets two picks of silverbeet; this year due to the drought and frosts he's had just the one. Despite recent rains, it's still a day at a time – and he has gravity-fed irrigation. The sub-soil moisture has been so severely depleted, he says, it will take years of normal rain to restore it. Al probably won't plant tomatoes this year; last season's crop was literally cooked on the vine. Not that he's complaining. He'll probably put in shade cloth, especially over the rhubarb and consider different hardier varieties. He's also planning to plant more broccoli, rhubarb, shallots, rosetta eggplant, beans, onions and baby bok choy. Fruit-wise, it's fejas, and

perhaps mandarins.

The one thing they all have in common is weeding and mulching. It's all done by hand. And it's never ending. Something else they have in common is a firm and abiding belief in what they're doing. They're dedicated to organics, to propagating open-pollinated seeds, improving soil quality, and growing in season. As many small farmers will attest, they're not in it for the money.

Meeting Gary, Belinda and Al confirmed the value of direct communication. Dave suggested crops they might be able to grow for us and they suggested crops we might be interested in, such as potatoes, sweet potatoes, silverbeet, fancy and cos lettuce, zucchini, squash, golden apple cucumbers, lebanese cucumbers, purple capsicums, parsnips and turnips. At the moment, there are four farmers in the group so if one can't supply an item, the others more than likely can.

There's something refreshing about sitting in the rows between the rocket and broccoli and talking shop. It's where it all begins. What our meeting also drove home was how hard farmers work, how it's day-to-day even though they plan ahead and how dependent we are on people like Al, Belinda and Gary.

MORE PICTURES FROM THE VISIT www.alfalfa-house.org/html/FEATURES/farm_visit.htm

– Stevie Bee

F+V CORNER

what's good in fruit+veg with Dominika Grossy

- ▶ Pink lady apples – crispy and very sweet
- ▶ Asparagus – that tender springtime favourite is back.
- ▶ Fresh turmeric. It's in the fridge next to the sprouts. We have both varieties in stock: Madras turmeric is the paler, milder variety; Alleppey turmeric contains more curcumin and so is a deeper shade of yellow and has a stronger flavour. As turmeric can stain, you might want to wear gloves when prepping.
- ▶ Farmer-Direct fresh herbs (St Mary's Thistle and Stinging Nettle). If you'd like these herbs, please place your order by noon Monday for delivery the following Wednesday. To order, email me (produce@alfalfahouse.org) or use the bulk order book in the office.

RECIPE OF THE MOMENT from Stevie Bee

Rye+date delight

A quick and simple brekkie alternative. Vegan, wheat-free. One serving.

- 2 slices (5mm each) Pure Life Sprouted Rye+Date loaf
- 2 tbsp carob
- 2 tbsp linseeds, ground or 1 tbsp flaxseed oil
- 1 apple (or other seasonal fruit), chopped
- 250ml (1 large cup) rice milk
- Steam slices in a vegetable steamer till soft (about 7 minutes), cube and place in dessert bowl. Sprinkle ground linseeds and carob powder over top. Add chopped apple. Pour on the milk.

OPTIONS:

- You can steam other breads, especially if they are a bit dry.
- Add ground pepitas in addition to or instead of linseeds
- Add a tablespoon of coconut flour with the carob powder

Feed the newsletter

This newsletter is your voice and a great way to communicate with other members. Please feel free to send in your hints, tips, ideas, suggestions and recipes to feedback@alfalfahouse.org

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