

Fields of dreams

A flock of sheep and a family's willingness to branch out and explore new ways of farming are behind a new Wairarapa-based milk venture.

STORY MATT PHILP





FORGET YOUR POST-WORKOUT protein shakes. If Cameron and Ben Ravenwood have their way, the muscle tonic you'll chug down next time you're at the gym will be milk from sheep. The 20-something brothers launched Fernglen Farm late last year, offering Performance Protein, a range of flavoured drinks with high protein and rich concentrations of amino acids favoured for muscle recovery and growth. The source of all this goodness? A flock of milking ewes wandering the flatlands of their parents' coastal Wairarapa sheep and beef farm.

Fernglen Farm is the latest venture to emerge from New Zealand's fledgling sheep-milk industry. Last year, Spring Sheep New Zealand, a joint-venture between state farmer Pāmu (formerly Landcorp) and marketing firm SLC Group, opened two new farms in the Waikato. It's currently building a \$50million milk sprayer dryer in Hamilton, in partnership with others, including major sheep dairying firm Maui Milk. Meanwhile, in Southland, fast-growing Blue River Dairy has pioneered sheep-milk infant formula.

The Ravenwoods expect to encounter some consumer resistance – as Ben, 25, concedes, “Sheep milk was an odd idea for me, too, if I’m being honest.” Yet the industry has enough momentum now to suggest they can make a go of it.

“Ten years ago it would have been very hard to launch this product,” says 21-year-old Cameron. “But consumers now are more open to trying new things – especially if there’s a health benefit involved.”

Fernglen Farm is really his baby, inspired by an article about the sheep-milk industry that he read during his last year of school. “It didn’t have much information, but it highlighted how much farmers were getting per kilogram of milk solids. It was \$18, which was a lot higher than cow dairying.”

Further reading revealed not only the nutritional benefits of sheep milk, but



some compelling environmental advantages. Later, while studying agribusiness and food marketing (he’s currently doing a masters in the same topic at Lincoln University), he pitched his budding business idea to parents Jeff and Shirley Ravenwood.

“Obviously it needed a lot of deep research to prove the feasibility and the budgeting side, but they’ve always been open to trying new things,” he says, adding that the whole ‘grass to glass’ idea also appealed. “They were interested in having more control over the end product, rather than relying on a fluctuating commodity price.”

The bulk of the 1144ha property near Riversdale Beach still runs as a traditional sheep and beef operation, but a chunk of the best flat country has been set aside for sheep milking, complete with a new herringbone milking shed with capacity for up to 1000 sheep. For the past three years, they have been breeding milking genetics into the flock.

Through a relationship with local sheep-milk pioneers Janet and Miles King, of Kingsmeade Artisan Cheese fame, processing and bottling is done at the Kingsmeade plant near Masterton.



Clockwise from top left: Sheep on the family’s Wairarapa farm; Ben (left) and Cameron (right) Ravenwood explain the merits of the sheep milk; Cameron developing recipes at Massey University. Opposite page: Cameron and Ben with sheep milk produced on the family farm.

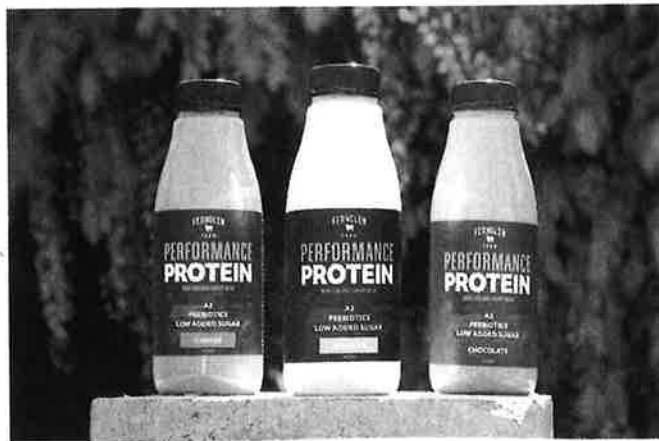


It's a family effort. Ben, who has a degree in human nutrition and sports science from Massey University, is the nutritionist, while sister Baeley, who has an agricultural science degree and is with PGG Wrightson in Canterbury, chips in plenty of ideas. "We're a close family," says Cameron, "and the idea of working together was always attractive."

To start, they're targeting health-conscious consumers, emphasising the nutritional qualities of sheep milk, which include micro-nutrients such as calcium, phosphorous and magnesium, and vitamins A, B and E.

Cameron points out that sheep milk also has A2 proteins and is easily digested. "It's really kind on the stomach, and a lot of people who are intolerant to cow's milk can drink it without any issues," he says. Older people, he adds, are another potential market. "It could be so beneficial to help them meet their daily macro- and micro-nutrient needs."

They also accentuate a sustainability angle – their website leads with the slogan, 'Better for You. Better for Earth.' Cameron says that sheep farming has less risk of nutrient leaching, and lower methane emissions than some other forms of farming. In that sense, adopting sheep



milking wasn't such a stretch for parents Jeff and Shirley, who are previous category winners in the Ballance Farm Environment Awards, and have a history of fencing off waterways and retiring farmland for native bush.

If the new venture takes off, it could be a catalyst, says Cameron. "We've always had a big focus on being sustainable, but we're hoping that by creating this brand and business, we're going to allow other farmers the opportunity to get into sheep milking and to farm more sustainably."

For now, however, they're in start-up

mode. The product is sold in Moore Wilson's and a handful of New World supermarkets in Wellington and Palmerston North, as well as cafes and specialty food outlets in the lower North Island.

But the intention is to take it nationwide – and possibly even further afield, according to Ben, who sees plenty of potential for other products, including unflavoured sheep milk.

"As long as we keep pushing it, I don't see a limit to how big it could get," he says. "We just have to make sure we get it right on a small scale, then we build on that." ☪
fernglenfarm.co.nz

From top: Cameron with some of the lambs; Fernglen Farm's Performance Protein sheep milk comes in coffee, vanilla and chocolate flavours.

