

BUFFALO COUNTRY

A FARMING MISHAP SENT ANDREW ROYAL
ON A CHEESEMAKING CRASH COURSE.

WORDS **GRETEL SNEATH** PHOTOGRAPHY **MARK ROPER**



Part of the herd waits
patiently in the yard by
the milking shed.
FACING PAGE After
milking, a lone buffalo
wanders back along the
road to the paddock.





“The buffalo were due to be milked and there was no-one else available, so I came out to the farm...”

ANDREW ROYAL WAS studying to become a nurse when he received an urgent phone call from his future father-in-law. Roger Haldane had just fallen and broken his elbow while herding buffalo. It wasn't Andrew's medical savvy he needed, but rather his novice skills as a farmhand.

“The buffalo were due to be milked and there was no-one else available, so I came out to the farm — and started milking,” Andrew says.

Within months, he was making cheese for the Haldane family business, and 13 years later, he is married to the job in every sense.

His day begins with a 2am trek out to the shed to fire up the diesel generator. Andrew, his wife Thea, and two young daughters live within walking distance of the Shaw River Buffalo Cheese factory at Yambuk, some 20 kilometres north-west of Port Fairy in Victoria.

“It is a flexible working environment and we try to schedule the cheesemaking to work with family commitments; we feel really fortunate that we are able to live and work in such a convenient set-up,” Thea says.

In between looking after daughters Zoe, 7, and Jazmin, 4, Thea oversees the marketing and administration of the Shaw River products. She also works alongside her sister, Amy Haldane, in the family's other main venture, breeding rare Icelandic horses (see our feature in the September issue).

“We have everything here that we need, and it's really a lovely lifestyle,” Thea says. The only time that lifestyle is cheerfully compromised is during the peak Christmas period, a “stupidly hectic” time when nonstop production is required to fill orders for their flagship creamy mozzarella, buffalo curd and natural yoghurt.

“We don't use any machines,” Andrew says. “It's more time-consuming, but people aren't looking for something mass-produced anymore; they appreciate the subtle changes found in handmade foods.”

Andrew and his staff churn out up to 52 tonnes of cheese and yoghurt annually, courtesy of a 300-strong herd of buffalo. The gentle beasts look quite at home roaming the banks of the Shaw River, though Roger still shudders when he recalls the logistical nightmare of importing his first shipment of 42 beasts from southern Italy in 1995.

“Dad has a bit of a history of importing unusual animals, and it was a major adventure for all concerned as they arrived on their own chartered jet, via a six-month stint in quarantine in Denmark,” Thea says.

When you consider that buffalo are found in plague-like proportions in northern Australia, the idea of flying them halfway round the world on a jumbo seems a little strange. But those feral herds are swamp buffalo, a different breed from the animals bred for milk and meat in Asia, and, more recently, parts of Europe. And apparently buffalo milk has several advantages for cheesemaking. “While it takes 10 litres of cow's milk to make one kilogram of cheese, the same amount of buffalo cheese requires less than half that amount of milk,” Andrew explains.

In July this year, Andrew completed his third stint in the United States teaching other mozzarella makers how to get the most out of their milk. Invitations have also been extended from enthusiastic cheesemakers from as far afield as Pakistan and Canada.

“Once upon a time, I would have been happy just to make a quid, but now I have my own family and work for a family-owned business, I've discovered the sense of pride that comes with doing something I really enjoy.” *

For more information on the Shaw River Buffalo Cheese factory, visit www.shawriverbuffalo.com

BUFFALO MILK

- Buffalo produce around 15 per cent of the world's milk.
- Butterfat is double that of cow's milk, yet cholesterol content is only 20 per cent.
- Calcium content is 30 per cent more than cow's milk, plus it has higher levels of protein, antioxidants, vitamin A and milk solids.
- Local and imported Italian buffalo cheese is available online from producers and providores, and at upmarket delicatessens.
- Fresh Australian buffalo mozzarella costs about \$40/kilogram, though prices vary considerably across the country.



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE Calves waiting for their morning feed; the herd is descended from animals imported by Roger Haldane; the milking shed; Jazmin, Thea, Zoe and Andrew outside the Shaw River factory; handmade balls of mozzarella. FACING PAGE A young calf, securely identified.

