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## GOOD TO GROW

A LOST CHILD, A STASH OF BEANS AND A VISION TO MAKE FARMING SEXY AGAIN – THAT’S WHAT SPARKED ONE OF AUSTRALIA’S MOST INNOVATIVE BUSINESS MODELS. AND EMMA AND TOM LANE OF BYRON BAY’S THE FARM ARE ONLY JUST GETTING STARTED.

words JO HEGERTY photos NATALIE McCOMAS

“We call it ‘the family,’” Tom Lane says, referring to the collection of horticulturists, bakers, restaurateurs and others with whom he and wife Emma have built their unique enterprise. The Farm at Byron Bay is – you guessed it – a farm. But it’s one like no other: the business model is so revolutionary that Tom and Emma struggle to properly label it. “People have called it an incubator, others have called it a collaborative community approach to business,” says Tom. “I don’t know. I don’t think anyone’s really done anything quite like it.”

Set on 80 acres at Ewingsdale, on the outskirts of Byron Bay, The Farm is a collection of seven New South Wales microbusinesses that work symbiotically to sustain the overall social enterprise. It’s a thriving small-scale farm defying the odds in a world of mass-produced, monoculture agribusinesses.

When you visit The Farm, as up to half a million people do each year, you are encouraged to wander at your leisure. Kids love seeing tractors in action, watching docile Scottish Highland cows who will never see an industrial feedlot in their lives, or spotting black heritage pigs rooting around in lush grass. There are paddocks brimming with organic vegetables, happy chooks roaming freely and fields of flowers sprouting where you least expect them. After exploring or taking a farm tour, you can pop inside a huge shed to taste the fruits of all this labour within the Three Blue Ducks restaurant, headed up by chef Darren Robertson. You can also snap up products to take home from the Produce Store, The Bread Social bakery and Flowers at The Farm.

Emma and Tom own and care for all of The Farm’s livestock, but three sets of farmers operate alongside them, producing more together than they ever could in isolation. Emma explains: “All those growers

would have to lease land and buy a tractor and all the equipment. Instead, we provide the land and infrastructure so all they need to focus on is growing and making sure they follow The Farm rules. That’s things like: you can’t keep working the land, it has to be nourished, so you have to rotate your crops and put nitrogen-rich plants back into the soil, and so on.”

Those farmers include Lynette Bradford who, along with her husband and their two children, grow produce on an acre-and-a-half parcel of The Farm. The deal is that they must sell their produce to the Three Blue Ducks restaurant, which in turn promises to take whatever the family can grow. Says Tom: “That one little spot feeds Lynette’s entire family and is their sole income.”

Lynette actually unwittingly played a key role in the making of The Farm. Back in 2012, she began helping Emma and Tom manage their small farm-away-from-home in Federal, about 20 kilometres west of Byron Bay, while the couple worked high-powered jobs in Sydney. Emma, who worked in advertising, says: “We came back six weeks after Lynette came on board to help us and, as we were coming in the drive, we saw this outline of a girl and wondered, ‘Who is that?’ Lynette had turned into this goddess of absolute health. She was glowing and her body was toned. I had this moment thinking of all those people in Sydney exercising like mad for an hour to compensate for eight to 12 hours at a desk and here was this girl who was a vision of health because she was getting probiotics from the soil, nibbling on all the greenery, planting and pruning and harvesting. It’s what the human body is designed to do.”

The moment that solidified everything, however, came about a year



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later – and it began with every parent’s worst nightmare. “Our third child, Matilda, went missing,” Tom explains. “She was only about three, and we couldn’t find her anywhere on the farm. It was action stations. Had she been bitten by a snake or fallen in the dam? Had she been kicked by a boar? Had she wandered through a fence into the forest and gotten lost? The last place we looked was the veggie garden and there was Matilda, sitting on the ground, her t-shirt stretched out holding a pile of beans. She was eating them as if they were chips or lollies.”

It was an epiphany moment. “We thought, if we can do that for her, we can do that for others,” says Tom. “All the jigsaw pieces started coming together. We saw the difference it made for Lynette and we saw the difference it made for our kids. When we were on the farm the kids were running around, climbing trees and planting things, and there was Matilda eating the beans she had grown. It was very simple but it was very powerful.”

Right away, Tom and Emma knew they wanted to offer this kind of experience to people beyond just their immediate family. And they wanted to do something to address the major disconnect between people living in “human filing cabinets”, as Tom calls cities, and the land and farmers who produce food. “Nowadays, even in country towns, people have to rely on supermarkets. Most people are disconnected from the farmer and their food, even when they drive past it every day. Something’s gone wrong – hugely wrong,” says Tom, who previously worked in fashion – his family founded luxury fashion label Orotin in 1938 – but grew up on a farm near Braidwood in New South Wales that his parents have owned for 50 years.

“The other disturbing fact is that by 2050 we need to grow 70% more food to feed everyone on the planet. But no one is inspired to get into farming. We have all these generational farmers – grandad was a dairy farmer, dad was a dairy farmer – but the next in line doesn’t want to be a farmer [because], one, it’s not economically viable

because major milk companies dictate the milk price; two, it’s bloody hard work; and three, it’s easier to get a job in a human filing cabinet. So dad has to sell the dairy farm and a big corporation starts doing mass-produced monocropping of goods, which is needed, don’t get me wrong. But the small-scale farms are disappearing. We felt very passionately about creating a way to inspire people to get into farming, or to at least know a farmer or where their food comes from.”

After finding the perfect location on the outskirts of Byron Bay, Tom and Emma launched The Farm in March 2015. They began by mapping out their mission statement, which aims “to create health and wellbeing from the ground up”. They also settled on their “grow, feed, educate” mantra, which remains at the core of all activities. That includes feeding not only the soil but also souls, with The Farm running school tours and accredited courses on bee-keeping and pasturing pigs to help build community and educate visitors.

Committed to giving back, Tom and Emma sponsor their local footy team and have helped plant 7000 rainforest trees. They’ve also donated an acre of land plus machinery and water to Liberation Larder, a local organisation feeding the homeless, which provides enough produce to create about 500 meals a week. “All of that leaves Tom and I with an incredible sense of purpose in our lives,” explains Emma.

But they’re not just focused on the progressive community surrounding them in Bryon Bay. Says Emma: “We asked ourselves, ‘How can we create a ripple effect, not just about health and wellbeing, but also getting people excited about farmers and make farming a kind of sexy profession again?’” Adds Tom: “We got 1000 schoolkids last year alone to come in and start to understand where their food comes from, so that’s the smallest ring in the ripple effect. Then we have between 350,000 and 500,000 people coming to the farm each year. But our big vision is to inspire or create more farms like this, where you can take a block of land that seems unviable to a traditional farming community and make it thrive.”

Emma and Tom know only too well how to do exactly that – their lush block was previously logged and used for growing sugarcane and then gladioli before it languished for years and was finally earmarked for a housing estate until the Lanes took it on. The couple now speak to farmers’ groups and councils and have travelled to Spain and the United Kingdom, discovering other innovative farms and speaking about their own slice of paradise. They also recently trekked though Tasmania with Landcare Australia, talking about modern-day farming and how to make unproductive land arable again.

Says Emma: “We’d love to see a number of The Farms around the country and even worldwide.” Adds Tom: “But if someone visits us and they walk out and decide to change the way they are dealing with their property to be more sustainable economically and financially, then that’s a tick. We just want to inspire people, and the story we tell is that it can be done.”

