



FARMING FOOD AND OUR FUTURE

Reconnecting to the land around us for the future of our food

How often do you consider where the food on your plate has come from? Where it was grown, who grew it and how it found its way to your dinner table? For most of us, the relationship between farming and our food has become so disconnected we take it for granted that the supermarket shelves will always be stocked with our favourites.

What's perhaps most ironic is that our gorgeous New England and North West region is home to one of Australia's most significant food bowls, The Liverpool Plains. It's right on our doorstep and yet for most of us we have very little connection to the land around us.

The vast and fertile Liverpool Plains stretch west from The Great Dividing Range to The Warrumbungle Range incorporating Tamworth, Gunnedah, Narrabri, Quirindi, Werris Creek, Breeza, Carrol, Mullaley and Willow Tree. Over 1.2 million hectares of rich diversity, natural beauty and undeniable agricultural significance.

For Liverpool Plains local Molly van Hemert, this connection to the land is inherent. As the Livestock Manager at Windy Station near Quirindi, Molly has actively pursued a career in agriculture, going on to study a Bachelor of Animal Science Majoring in Livestock Production at UNE after completing her high school studies at Calrossy in Tamworth.

"I've always had an interest in the land and farming, but studying agriculture at school really confirmed my desire to pursue a career in the industry. Our agriculture teacher at Calrossy, Bronwyn Nielson, was so supportive and encouraging for anyone considering an agriculture focused career. Without question, she helped drive my interest and ambition."

Molly's passion for farming and in particular its role in food production is tangible. She speaks with infectious enthusiasm about the importance of engaging younger generations to help secure the future of local agriculture for food production.

In a wonderful full circle story, Molly herself is now supporting the education of the next generation. Molly sponsors Calrossy to have access to an innovative education unit, Food Bowl Connection, which her old teacher Bronwyn Nielson now uses to teach the social, cultural and political issues surrounding food security.

It's almost a given that Molly inherited a love for farming and her deep connection to that land from her mum. Dr Robbie van Hemert is a research artist and farmer who lives on the Liverpool Plains. Robbie developed the concept of a Land Biography, through her PHD at the University of New England, which encompasses the geological, cultural and historical significance of the land.

Through her business, Food River Station, and in consultation with education consultant Angela Colliver, Robbie developed Food Bowl Connection to be an innovative and adaptive education unit for primary and secondary students in years 5, 6, 7 and 8. Incorporating elements of geological history, crop production and botanical as well as landscape imagery, Food Bowl Connection builds a relationship between students and their food source.

"The best thing about children is that they are so a receptive to new ideas, so they're more likely to take this information and connection to the land with them through to adulthood. We know that building a meaningful connection to a place is a vital element to caring for it, which is one of the aims of the unit," said Molly.

She goes on to speak about the poor misrepresentation of farmers in pop-culture and how that contributes to the gap between farmers and their city counterparts. There is still a long way to go in improving the image of farming and agriculture more broadly. Molly notes many people aren't aware just how much agriculture has evolved and how technologically and scientifically advanced it has become.



“Agriculture is an incredibly diverse industry with a huge variety of careers. People generally think of a career in agriculture as just physically working on the land, but there is so much more to it than that. There are science focused roles, marketing roles, consultancy, management – the opportunities are endless. Hopefully Food Bowl Connection is a great starting point to getting more students interested in a career in agriculture.”

One of the tasks within the unit asks students to design a brand identity for The Liverpool Plains and its produce. There is also an exciting national competition for students based around this task called Brand Muster which boasts an incredible panel of judges including celebrity chef Christine Mansfield, celebrated foodie Josephine Perry (Neil Perry’s daughter) and President of the National Farmer’s Federation and Liverpool Plains farmer Fiona Simson. An awards ceremony for Brand Muster will be held at the Quirindi Spring Show, September 9, 2017.

With more than 3,000 students across NSW currently undertaking the unit, including students from 10 Tamworth schools and 10 schools within The Liverpool Plains Shire, Food Bowl Connection has been well received by students and teachers alike.

For both Molly and Robbie, spreading the word about Food Bowl Connection and the sponsorship program Food River Link is vital to getting it into more schools, particularly as the biggest hurdle to getting it into schools is the awareness of school administrators about the initiative.

Food River Link is not just about financially supporting schools (through an annual access fee of just \$250 which gives a school access) but also about creating a community between the sponsors, the students and a personal link to The Liverpool Plains. Existing corporate sponsors include Romani Pastoral Company, Windy Station and Jack’s Creek as well as numerous individual sponsors.

“Jack’s Creek, renown for producing the ‘World’s Best Steak’, a title they’ve won twice now, has joined the program as a corporate sponsor of 10 Tamworth schools who are already well underway with the unit now. We’d love to see more sponsors come on board to help more students both in our region and metropolitan based schools access Food Bowl Connection,” said Robbie.

For more information or to become a sponsor of this remarkable program contact Robbie van Hemert (robbie@foodriverstation.com) or visit foodriverstation.com

