

**Gavin O'Brien**

With just a couple of calves and 130 hectares of land as starting capital, the O'Brien family, who are originally from New Zealand, have built up a robust dairy unit during the past 20 years.



Australia

Herd size: **500 cows and 200 young stock**

Land: **Dairy platform 200ha,  
mainly grass. Serviced by  
120ha of run-off blocks**



Gavin O'Brien



Extreme conditions: milking in a tough climate

Gavin O'Brien prefers a good night's sleep to a big pay packet

# Back to basics Down Under

Constantly confronted by extremes in weather and market conditions, Australian producer Gavin O'Brien prefers a simple farming system although he doesn't always earn the highest salary.

text **Wichert Koopman**

**G**avin O'Brien describes his dairy set-up in two words: 'pretty basic'. Together with his wife, his parents, one permanent staff member and a few casual workers he milks 500 cows on 200 hectares of land in Yeo, 150 kilometres west of Melbourne. The most important buildings are a shelter for the simple swing-over milking parlour and a shed for the youngest calves. There is no automation on the farm and limited mechanisation. Apart from the youngest calves, the cattle are outside throughout the year. The winters in this part of Australia, with an average daytime temperature below 13°C, are mild but quite wet. The summers are dry and the daytime temperature can hit around 40°C. For a few days, however, the temperature can rise quite considerably.

In Australia producing milk is easiest in the winter and spring when the grass is growing abundantly. Despite the dry summers the climate in the state of Victoria is favourable for growing grass. "With sufficient moisture grass growth explodes in the spring when the temperature suddenly rises. From one minute to the next instead of too little we have too much grass for the cows. We then cut some of it to make silage or hay to get us through the dry periods,"

Gavin explains. His dairy produces almost 20,000kg of milk per hectare most years and is self-sufficient in forage. On average the farm grows 15 tonnes of dry matter in grass every year.

## Recovery year

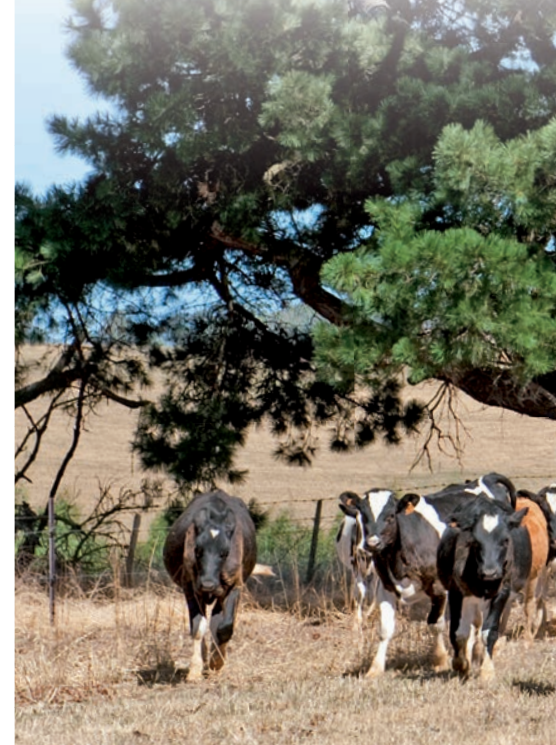
Gavin's situation highlights that milking cows in this part of the world means constantly anticipating greatly changing conditions. He says that 2013 was so bad that even 'seasoned' producers panicked. The average milk price was low at just £2.37 per kilogramme of milk solids (17ppl) and, due to drought, there was a serious shortage of feed. "In the end hay that was intended for export to Japan was sold on the domestic market," he says. "But the price was exorbitant."

The current milk year, which ends at the beginning of May 2015 when all the cows are dried off, has been more positive. Gavin calls it a 'recovery year'. The milk price is around £3.51 per kilogramme of milk solids (26ppl), the cows began their lactation a bit thin but their milk production persisted at a good level and sufficient feed was produced to survive the dry period.

Despite that this was also a year of

extremes. In January – the middle of the Australian summer and the period in which the photos for this report were taken – the temperatures rose day after day to record highs of more than 40°C. "In just a few days the grass changed from green to brown," says Gavin.

The Australian is of the opinion that a simple 'low input' farming system is the best response to the vagaries of the weather and the market. The cows produce as much milk as possible from grazed grass. In the milking parlour, irrespective of production or stage of lactation, they are given 2.5kg of feed concentrate twice a day. This supplementary feed consists mainly of cereals but, depending upon the amount



The herd is outside all year round



Swing-over parlour is used to milk the herd



Cows waiting in the collecting yard



Hay is fed to the herd during drier periods

of grass available, it is sometimes mixed with sources of protein like rape seed or lupin. If the quality of the meadow grass declines too much, during wet weather, Gavin balances the feed ration with high quality hay.

### Seasonal production

He practises a block calving system so that the milk production curve runs as closely as possible to the production curve of the grass. “We dry all the cows off at the beginning of May and we can just lead a normal life,” says Gavin. At the beginning of July – the middle of the Australian winter – the calving season begins.

Australian dairies also pay a supplement on the milk price during periods when the supply of milk is limited. Some producers take advantage of this by calving cows in the summer. Gavin is not convinced about this. “This supplement is very attractive, but you also have to put in a lot of effort and expenditure to let the

cows produce plenty of milk in dry weather. I don’t subject myself, or the cows, to that.”

In Australia milk is paid for on the basis of milk solids, which means combined kilograms of fat and protein. Depending on how the grass grows during the season on Gavin’s farm, the cows produce between 570kg and 600kg of milk solids per lactation. With an average butterfat of 4.3% and an average protein of 3.4%, that’s between 7,400 and 7,800kg of milk.

### Breeding strategy

For the next few years his challenge is to further optimise the current farming system. “I am aiming for 620kg of milk solids per cow per year and think I can achieve that by improving herd management,” he says.

Breeding also contributes to the herd’s success and Gavin’s future ambitions. Every year he buys 600 straws of sperm from five different bulls. The breeding

values for kilograms of fat and protein and type are top of his list when selecting sires. He also wants to breed cows of average height in a bid to limit poaching during wet periods. “There is a big difference between 500 800kg cows walking around and 500 500kg cows.”

Gavin buys semen from CRV Australia. As well as bulls from New Zealand, Dutch sires, including Grandprix, have also been on the AI list. Daughters by CRV Ambreed sires Overdrive and Firenze and Holler feature heavily in the herd. Cows will soon be calving to Big Winner and Kodak. Milking more cows is not top of Gavin’s list. “There is a temptation to milk more cows in a good grass growing year, or when the milk price is high. But decisions like that have a habit of coming back to haunt you when you have to buy in expensive feed. With 500 cows on 200 hectares, our unit can usually absorb fluctuations in feed production. We don’t always make the highest profit, but at least we can sleep well at night.’ |

