

Episode 14

Starting with just 50 hens

with **Kate Rothacker**

Podcast Description for <http://greengrassseggfarming.com>

Daniel OBrien has a chat with Kate Rothacker from Top Hundred acres. Kate shares her journey into pastured egg farming from when it all started back in 2013. Starting with just 50 hens Kate has grown her flocks and her brand. (edited)

Description for ChickenCaravan.com.

Join Daniel OBrien as he talks with Kate Rothacker from Victoria Australia. Learn how she started with just 50 hens and grew her business and egg brand.

Daniel: Daniel OBrien here, welcome back to Green Grass Egg Farming. Today I'm chatting with Kate from Top Hundred Acres in Victoria, Australia. How are you, Kate?

Kate: I'm well, thanks, Daniel. How are you?

Daniel: I'm going very well. So I wanted to chat with you today. We have known each other for a few years now but I wanted to go back to before you had chickens on your farm—a bit about your farm, such as how big it is and where it's located.

Kate: We are near Whittlesea which is about 40 km to the north of Melbourne near Yan Yean Reservoir. The whole farm is around 200 acres. Historically we've had horses on the farm. It's been in the family for about 70 years. I had my six to eight backyard chickens my whole life but we've never done chickens on a commercial scale before we started with the Chicken Caravan.

Daniel: So, okay, how long ago was it now that you got your first lot of chickens—that was more than six chickens—how long are we talking?

Kate: It was 2013. I think we got our first Chicken Caravan and we started with 50 chickens. We got the Chicken Caravan 450; we started with 50 just to see how we went and from there we grew relatively quickly and it went up to about 600 and we now have just over a thousand.

Daniel: What was it like for you in those early days before you even got those 50 chickens? What were you thinking about the idea of getting chickens and how was that all going to work for you?

Kate: We were looking for an income stream for the farm and also a way to improve the pasture. I remember Googling—I've always been really interested in permaculture—and stumbling across your caravans and I was thinking that they would be really good. That was basically the reason why we started with the chickens and it went from there. And it's hard to believe it's that many years ago now.

Daniel: How long did you have 50 chickens before you decided this could be a goer, to get your confidence up to say hey, let's ramp up some numbers now?

Kate: A fairly short time. We probably had them for three or four months before we got a bigger flock. It was a good thing to get your head around it all first, how to manage them and how everything works, but it was really quickly. I guess we just delivered our eggs into shops and everyone loved the taste of them and it went from there.

Daniel: Were you surprised how fast the market got on board and got behind your product and ultimately became customers?

Kate: I was, yeah. I remember our first client, which is our local IGA; we delivered them on consignment so we went in there to see if they sold and they sold very quickly and from there we developed some really good relationships with smaller retail outlets. They have been very supportive of our product and they came out to visit the farm and to see how we actually do things. I guess I was surprised that it took off very quickly.

Daniel: You talked about smaller retailers so where are most of your eggs sold now, is it through retail shops, restaurants, cafes, direct consumers?

Kate: We do two farmers markets. They're our direct sources of selling our eggs. And we have about eight restaurants and smaller shops that we supply to so it's probably about a fifty-fifty split.

Daniel: So on the farm now you've got about a thousand hens; what are some of the other livestock or crops that you also have on the farm?

Kate: Initially we grew some organic garlic and we still do that on a very small scale, not as much as we used to. We have some beef cattle and we still have quite a few horses that we breed on the farm. Those are the other activities we do along with the pastured eggs.

Daniel: I noticed from your Facebook page in the early days you just had alpacas guarding your chickens but now you've got a few Maremma dogs. Tell me about them.

Kate: Yes, we've recently got three Maremma pups which is a whole new world for me. My family has definitely fallen in love with them because they're beautiful dogs. I mean, the alpacas have done a good job of guarding. We still have some alpacas with some of our flocks but the Maremmas are in training at the moment. They've been really great. I've heard various experiences from people but I think it's been good, that's why we've got three. They're brothers and sisters and they're in a big area and they play with each other and they've been great with the chooks so far. They came from somewhere where mum and dad were guarding chooks so that's sort of what they've known their whole life. They're beautiful dogs.

Daniel: Why did you decide to go with Maremma dogs since you already had alpacas? Were you after something different?

Kate: I guess it's my dream long term to farm without fencing so that's part of that. Perhaps I could do that with the alpacas, I'm not sure, but I think they might tend to wander a bit further so the dogs are an avenue that hopefully one day we can let down the fences and work with them.

Daniel: You've definitely got the land there, being a couple hundred of acres, to move your chickens around, you're not confined to a 30-acre area for a thousand chickens so you've got massive amount to run.

Kate: Yeah, we're very fortunate like that.

Daniel: When you first started you were looking for income and also the nutrients, the manure for the farm. How has your farm responded now, because you have had a few years of rotating your chickens around, have you seen a noticeable difference in your pasture and the quality of the grass coming through?

Kate: We have, yeah. We were actually just talking the other day and obviously it's springtime at the moment and you can definitely see where we've done the rotations of the caravans and the different species of grass that are coming through and they're slightly different colour: definitely that would be one of the biggest benefits I would say about farming with the caravans. It's really been great.

Daniel: With your flocks do you have different age groups and how many flocks are you running at any one time?

Kate: We have three flocks. We obviously have our new flock coming through. I've got a flock at the moment that hasn't quite started laying. And then we have two flocks and when our birds get to about 18 months of age, we sell them to people for backyard hens so that's how we keep moving our flocks through.

Daniel: No matter what time of year you're at you've always got eggs on because you've got different-age flocks. It's not like you get rid of them at one time.

Kate: Yeah. And obviously with the eggs we sell we have various sizes depending on what outlets they're going to or the market. It's really important that you keep some different egg sizes running through. You don't have the same egg size all the time.

Daniel: Tell me about how you sell off the layers. So they've finished at your farm, you want to make room for younger birds, new layers, how do you go about advertising and selling and moving those?

Kate: So predominantly we use social media. We put an advertisement up on social media to gauge interest and then there's also a lot of word of mouth, people that maybe came and got hens a couple of years ago and a fox might have taken them or for various reasons they need more, they come back to us. Social media is a great thing because it does put the word out there but it's also word of mouth.

Daniel: So these are just people on a suburban block or they're on a small farm? Who are the sort of people that buy your older hens?

Kate: It's typically suburban blocks. There are a few people on small acreage that will take larger numbers like 10 or 20 birds. But typically your average person will take three or four hens for the backyard and they just live in suburbia and we get really good feedback, that they're laying eggs and they transition well; people come and pick them up at nighttime to minimise stress. It works really well and I think it's a good system to have.

Daniel: And they're really getting good value and a quality bird because it's been out in the field, in the sunshine, on pasture, living a great life, and then it's going to someone's backyard; it's not like it's been locked up in a shed all its life and when you put it outside it will die of heat stress or something.

Kate: Yeah, absolutely. I think people appreciate that you've looked after the birds and it's good value for money if you go and buy a new bird; some of them are \$30 – \$35 to buy. It's good, we have got quite good feedback.

Daniel: It's also good for you because those hens don't owe you any money because they've already paid for themselves—they've laid eggs that you've sold—but it is nice to get some money back that can go towards the next flock.

Kate: Yeah, definitely. It makes a big difference. So if you can keep that income coming back, some of it, it makes a big difference.

Daniel: You mentioned earlier that when you're selling to some of the smaller retailers they visited the farm. Tell me more about that.

Kate: Early on we had some groups, I guess there's one particular business, a local deli that sells quite a few of our eggs. They regularly have a day for their staff and they take them out for breakfast or might do something with them. They all came out to the farm and we basically did the farm walk and showed them the housing and how the birds live and answered any questions they had. It was great because obviously they come back and they're the ones with direct contact to their customers so they've seen our farm in action and they could actually tell people how we farm and what we do and what the product is. I think that was really invaluable that they actually came to see what we did.

Daniel: I think the more any farmer can do that, the better, because you're really adding great transparency. They can feel connected and know what's actually going on. I've said it many times before, there's almost no transparency in the food industry today: like you could go to a store and buy some bacon, and all you know is if it was Australian or imported.

You actually don't know any more so to be able to open up your farm to say hey, come and see, all those people have a connection because it's not like they just heard about it but they've actually walked on the pasture, seen the chickens, seen where they live, where they lay eggs, and especially if they're the staff that are in that store, because if someone asks questions about your eggs they know firsthand the quality of the hens and the pasture and the quality of your eggs.

Kate: Yeah. I think it's been a huge part in terms of building ourselves that they're able to talk about our product with direct experience.

Daniel: What were some of the challenges over the years that maybe you might not have expected as you've jumped into this new industry?

Kate: I think for me it's a border thing. I mean, I came from more of a corporate background. I've lived on the farm my whole life but I went off to study into work and so a lot of it was the mechanical part: we shift caravans with the tractor and things and explaining how to adjust and tinker with things, I've become so much better with all that kind of stuff.

I suppose it's just learning about how to manage the birds best, what makes them happy. I think one of the biggest learnings is they lay the best eggs when you pretty much leave them alone to do their own thing.

Daniel: So now that you're at three flocks and a thousand hens do you feel that's a comfortable number for you or do you feel you're going to expand or change. or what does the future hold?

Kate: I think at this stage it's probably a comfortable number. I do the majority of work with a little bit of external help but I think we want to keep it small because to me if you get a lot bigger, then it changes the capacity of what you can do, how you farm and all the rest. So I think for us it's probably good at this stage. But you never say never! So we'll just see what the future holds.

Daniel: You used to grow garlic on a larger scale, you still do that on a small scale, is that right?

Kate: We do. And probably about 18 months ago we planted some capers and we're experimenting with some different things and we'll just see how they go, but I mean the chickens have been a really good thing to do because it's obviously a direct sort of instant income source whereas a lot of other things obviously you have to wait till the end of the year to be paid. They work quite differently.

Daniel: Thank you so much for your time and it's great hearing your journey from having six chickens up to three flocks now and a thousand hens, selling your eggs at retail stores and farmers markets. If people want to see more they can check out Top Hundred Acres on the web or on Facebook. Thanks so much for your time, Kate.

Kate: Thanks, Daniel.