



## JOHN (JR) VAN VLIET & JAMIEE BURNS JR'S ORCHARD



### GALLAGHER INNOVATION AWARD

JR and Jamiee's confidence and commitment flies in the face of some commonly held perceptions of the pip fruit industry.

The Greytown couple have just completed an 18-month, \$2.4million project to cover 80ha of their 135ha property in high tech netting, and they're certain the netting will pay for itself within three years. Business, they say, is good, with markets opening up for the quality fruit they are in no doubt they can consistently produce in the Wairarapa climate, now they have the netting.

The award judges liked their can-do, innovative approach to operating their apple and pear business, and their attention to detail. "Strong courage," noted the judges, and "sheer enthusiasm and very pro-active in solving problems in a perceived difficult industry". The judges commended JR and Jamiee's "strong partnership". They have clear roles in the business and live on the property with their daughter Melissa (4).

Formerly a fireman and a shorthand secretary, JR and Jamiee purchased their property, situated three kilometres east Greytown, six years ago from a group of investors who were keen to exit the industry. They took a chance to do so, selling "everything we had" including 40ha of pip fruit trees JR had built up from his original four hectare property on the west side of Greytown.

Six years on they have secured themselves a credible foothold in the industry, employing up to 115 workers in their peak time. They have lifted the production of the place from 40,000 cartons a year to 158,000, without planting any new trees. "It's been a struggle," JR admits, "but now we're making money".

In addition to the net canopy they've invested in facilities on the property, recognising the importance of coolstore, handling and transport infrastructure in their quest for maximising return for their produce, which is all exported.

They had to do the rounds of the banks

before PGG Wrightson backed their netting canopy project, which is the largest continuous net cover in the country.

"It seems like a lot of money, but when you do the numbers, it stacks up," says JR. They predict their production will rise another 40,000 cartons with the netting. "We have a US buyer who will take all the pears we can grow, and he wants us to plant more.

"We used to have to spend \$140,000 a year on hail insurance alone, it was a bank requirement," explains JR. "Worrying about the hail is in the past now." Other benefits of the netting include eliminating bird, sun and wind damage, minimising insect damage, reducing water loss from the soil and controlling spray drift.

Between 1000 and 1500 store lambs are fattened under the fruit trees from harvest completion through till the spring. "They love those fermenting apples on the ground," says JR, "and they make a good job tidying up the grass and fertilising while they're at it."

Twenty hectares of the orchard is in a flood zone, this is used for grazing and in the summer baleage is made. JR has planted five hectares of pines, a forestry woodlot that also provides the orchard protection from the destructive northwest and southerly winds. The Papawai stream boundaries the property on three sides.

The property adjoins the Papawai pa, which JR says in the 1880s was home to a Maori parliament and 3000 people, "that's a few more than the population of Greytown today". In WWII a rifle range on the place was heavily used by American troops. They recognise and respect these historic features.

### JUDGES POINTS

- Sheer enthusiasm and very pro active in solving problems in a perceived difficult industry.
- Major infrastructure improvements such as Protective netting, new coolstores, covered and temperature controlled loading facilities, grading machines, accommodation of seasonal labour, global gap quality assurance.
- Strong courage to invest in new systems.
- Strong partnership with excellent individual skill sets.
- Excellent knowledge of how markets work and readily adaptable to their requirements.
- Committed to fruit quality with excellent grading, tracking and audit processes.
- Excellent pest and disease monitoring, assisting in timely pest management treatments.
- Are a TESCO direct supplier.
- Active adjustment to the varietal production through grafting and planting of new varieties.