



## hatching a plan

CHICKENS AND EGGS PROVE A WISE BUSINESS CHOICE FOR A FAMILY ON A SMALL PROPERTY NEAR NSW'S TAMWORTH.

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Four-year-old Sophie O'Connell offers some feed to one of the Plymouth Rock hens. **FACING PAGE** The vintage sign at New England Pastured Eggs recalls long-gone prices: "They cost more like \$7.50 a dozen now!" says Sophie's mother, Kirsty.

PEOPLE KENTUCKY NSW

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Kirsty, Arron and Sophie; a very free-ranging Isa Brown; Sophie climbs a large pine in the back paddock; helping her mother collect the eggs.



As a teenager growing up on a hobby farm near Tamworth, Arron O'Connell bred chickens. His bird of choice was the Plymouth Rock, a large, handsome and old-fashioned breed whose jet-black feathers are rippled with a fine white stripe. "I used to have about 50 hens and sell eggs to neighbours," he recalls. Now an adult, Arron finds himself back in the egg business, and though there are a few Plymouth Rocks pecking around the back garden, the main enterprise is a flock of 450 Isa Browns laying 350 eggs a day.

It was the purchase of a charming cottage in Kentucky, a tiny rural community that's still in New England but some 60 kilometres north-east of Tamworth, that steered Arron back into poultry. The goal was to create a full-time farm job and use the 16-hectare property as productively as possible.

As Arron and his wife Kirsty considered the options, chooks came up trumps. "We started with cattle," Kirsty says. "But it was really just a hobby... As a small-scale operator, hens are probably the most productive and sustainable you can be on land this size. Arron has always wanted to be a farmer and now he is. He's living his dream."

Roses spill over the cottage fence and the garden is filled with flowers despite the unremitting dry. The property was formerly an orchard, as were many other soldier settlement blocks in the district, and had been in the same family for many years before Arron and Kirsty fell under its spell.

The two met as students at the University of New England 16 years ago. Arron was midway through a rural science degree and Kirsty, who grew up in Sydney, had just enrolled in nursing — "I just had to get out of the city," she says. In fact, Kirsty considers herself a country girl at heart, spending school holidays on a friend's farm in the Riverina and then in 1997, via family connections, spending nine months working on a Danish dairy farm after finishing school.

Arron had a spell at the same farm after finishing university in 1999 and a few years later, when the pair worked their way around Europe together, he picked potatoes in Ireland, then harvested wheat on farms in the UK. >



Alpacas Casper (left) and Sebastian have stopped jumping fences and are happy to guard the chickens from foxes and eagles.

## PEOPLE KENTUCKY NSW

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT  
Walking up the drive; Eily is quite  
used to the flock; Arron brings  
eggs to the coolroom where  
they're graded and packed;  
one of the farm's original sheds.



**“OUR PRINCIPLE IS TO  
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FARM ETHICALLY.”**



In 2008 they found themselves back in New England when Arron got a job as an agronomist, but finding the right home with some acreage took another couple of years. “When we drove up the lane, I almost had a heart attack,” Kirsty says. “I was saying, ‘We have to buy this!’ It had an older-style house and a beautiful garden. It was green back then and it looked like an English country lane.”

They moved in March 2010. It has been a busy four years, marked by the arrival of Sophie, now four, and two-year-old Eily. The house has been painted and new carpet laid. There are new fences and a shed, once home to Italian prisoners working on the orchard during World War II, has been converted into an office. And then 18 months ago the chooks arrived and New England Pastured Eggs was born.

The hens are free to roam 24 hours a day. They live within a large moveable electric fence that, along with the caravan where they roost and lay, is moved to fresh pasture each week. With foxes and eagles a threat, a pair of alpacas — Casper and Sebastian — run with the chickens to help keep predators away.

“They’re quiet,” Arron says of the alpacas, this being an important consideration with neighbours close by. “They feed on pasture, so there’s no need for additional feed.” And there’s an alpaca stud just five minutes away, whose owners keep an eye on Casper and Sebastian, and even come by to shear them. “They seem quite content,” Arron says. “Although they *did* jump the fence in the first week they were here...”

“It’s a backyard set-up on a commercial scale,” Kirsty says, summing up the enterprise she and Arron have embarked on. “Our principle is to deliver locally and farm ethically. These birds’ beaks are intact, they get to scratch around in the dirt, they’re on new pasture every week and we think that makes a difference to the taste of the egg.”

With that, she brings to the table an orange and almond cake, whose deep saffron colour comes from those fresh free-range yolks. It would seem churlish not to put her hypothesis to the test... “Yes please, with cream!” \*  
For more information about New England Pastured Eggs, telephone (02) 6778 7241 or visit [facebook.com/NewEnglandPasturedEggs](http://facebook.com/NewEnglandPasturedEggs)