

Forging pathways to market

Colin Trudgen and Sally Ruljancich's certified Organic Lamb and Beef business in Dollar, South Gippsland, has turned the concept of direct selling to customers on its head and paid dividends for the family.

Colin and Sally originally switched from selling into saleyards to online five years ago, to establish a more direct link with their customers.

They've since progressed from a Facebook and Instagram mail list and delivery system to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program they began in 2017. The program allowed them to sell their entire year's harvest of lambs and steers within 11 hours of start-up. The CSA program provides Colin and Sally with a regular income from regular customer payments, and more time to focus on creating a deeper connection with their customers.

Sally is passionate about the CSA approach and currently has a 15-year waiting list for her and Colin's CSA shares. She has started the CSA Network Australia and New Zealand with NSW farmer, Joel Orchard, to help other farmers sell this way.

Sally is also the co-founder of the Prom Coast Food Collective, together with fellow farmer Amelia Bright of Amber Creek Farm and Sawmill. Created through an online hub on the Open Food Network, the Collective includes about 20 small-scale ethical organic and regenerative farmers and makers from South Gippsland and Bass Coast shires.

Instead of customers attending a farmers' market, they pre-order and pre-pay online for the Collective's produce and collect their order from a convenient central location at an appointed time. Here they can meet the Collective's suppliers and still experience the farmers' market atmosphere.

The beauty of this system for all, according to Sally, is that it takes the guesswork out of the selling and buying equation. Customers know exactly what they're buying and the quantities, and sellers know exactly what to supply and when.

The Open Food Network is an open access database and e-commerce platform for producers. Prom Coast Food Collective sales are conducted through the Network during the first two weeks of the month, then all producers meet at the Blue Tree Honey Farm in Dumbalk on the third Sunday of each month to hand out their produce to consumers. In addition to this monthly convergence, the Collective is growing, with eight other collection points around Gippsland and Melbourne.

“The model is definitely working for us. We have control over our supply, know we provide what our customers want, and are able to spend weekends with our family and on the farm,” Sally says.

Photograph: Amelle Photography

