

On the land

Small cattle could be big business for an astute Nar Nar Goon North woman. Alison Livermore told **Danny Buttler** she hopes miniature Herefords could become a regular feature of the rural landscape.



Cute enough to eat

On the land



Alison Livermore and John Murphy with Boomer the bull.
Picture: KIM CARTMELL

LESS may be more when it comes to Herefords. The famous British cattle breed is now available in a new compact, easy to handle size, just right for today's busy hobby farmer.

Alison Livermore, who runs the 28-acre Winmore Stud in Nar Nar Goon North with partner John Murphy, believes the stumpy-legged versions of the standard Hereford - the back of a bull comes up to about waist height - could be more than just a novelty animal that keeps the grass down..

Alison sees miniature Hereford breeding as a way to make better use of smaller acreages that are often used as little more than rest homes for sheep.

"All these little hobby farms that are around, they could be viable little businesses, so that land doesn't have to sit there and do nothing," she said.

For the past five years, Alison has moved from experimenting with the cattle to spreading the gospel of the bantam bovines.

It was a big step into little cows for someone who grew up in the fruit business.

Alison's parents, Douglas and Margaret were fruit growers at their "Winmore" property in Vermont, before pioneering kiwi fruit growing at Avonsleigh. Her brother Stephen now runs the successful vineyard.

She now has a herd consisting of two bulls, a couple of heifers and 10 cows, all of which can be handled by farm novices.

"Temperament wise they are easy for people who aren't from a farm background to manage," Alison said.

"Even with the bull, I can just cruise around them, I don't need to carry a stick or anything."

“That’s why I think they are viable as an animal, because you are not wasting resources growing something that is going to be used as fertiliser.

Alison Livermore

"He knows I'm the boss, but if you show you are worried about him, he will take advantage of that, But they become pets so easily - give them a scratch and they are putty in your hands."

The boom in lifestyle properties on the urban fringe made Alison think of what these small landholders needed for their land. She reckons a mini-Hereford or three is the answer.

"I am in an area surrounded by a whole lot of little properties, some are only a couple of acres, some are 60 acres, and a lot of people don't want to handle big cattle and they don't have the facilities anyway," she said.

"These guys fitted the bill, as far as I was concerned, for a whole lot of hobby farmers who need something to keep the grass down or to cross graze with their horses, to put in the freezer or to have as pets - because these guys are really cute."

An advantage of having a smaller grazer in the paddock is that pastures can be better preserved when climatic conditions would otherwise make it impossible.

With two sodden winters behind us, many farmers would attest to the damage that the cows can inflict.

The miniature Hereford was originally bred in the US, where a Texan family decided the super-sizing of cattle was getting out of control in the 1960s. The smaller breed is now a recognised category in the world of cattle officialdom.

"Miniatures are not dwarfs, they are in the same stud book as other Herefords, it's just that they are shorter," Alison said.

"They have their own height standard and we have three sizes - the miniatures, classics and the big ones as well."

While not exactly flooding the cattle sale markets, the miniature Hereford movement has spread a long way from the Largent family's Texas ranch, with studs now in New Zealand, Scotland and in every state of Australia.

Alison bought her first stock from Tasmania, where a vibrant industry has developed in recent years.

"Little Island, little state, little cows - but they are getting quite big over there," she said.

Mini Meat

UNLESS they are lucky enough to be born as dairy cows, most cattle have a one-way ticket to the abattoir.

The miniature-Hereford usually makes the same trip from farm to freezer, but it does have a secret weapon in its battle for survival - its cuteness.

Alison Livermore recently sold a young beast to a local man, who wanted to give it to his wife as the traditional leather gift of the third wedding anniversary.

Rather than ending up as sirloin and sausages, this lucky animal managed to charm its way into a long and pampered life as a children's pet.

"That little fellow really landed on his hooves, I don't think he will be off to the knackery," Alison said.

While most other miniature Herefords are not so lucky, Alison reckons it's a stroke of good fortune for anyone who decides to freeze pack, rather than befriend the animals.

Asked if she had ever had problems sending stock to the slaughterhouse, the 48-year-old made it clear that steak trumps sentimentality.

"No ... they eat really well," she said.

"Your steaks can be smaller, but they are still big enough.

"We have a friend who calls them snack packs, which is kind of a cute term."

Alison believes that much of the carcass of a normal Hereford is wasted, with bones and other non-meat taking up a huge percentage of the animal's weight.

"Normally you get 50 per cent meat and 50 per cent all the other bits - bone and head and what-have-you - but some (miniature Herefords) got to 68 per cent of meat because they haven't got these great long legs and great big heads," he said.

"While their bodies are smaller, they are still nuggety compact things.

"That's why I think they are viable as an animal, because you are not wasting resources growing something that is going to be used as fertiliser."

— Danny Buttler



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