

Sommerlad Poultry Project

A SUMMARY AND VISION

by Michael and Kathryn Sommerlad

Michael worked in the Australian intensive meat chicken industry in the late 1990's, managing broiler breeder farms, and an imported great grandparent facility. During this time, the industry began the process of discontinuing Australian strains of meat chickens, and associated genetic work and knowledge. This process continued until the present situation: where nearly all chicken farmed and consumed in Australia is one of only two imported fast-growing strains.

Responding to an opportunity to purchase some of the redundant strains of Australian meat chickens, in 2001, we began a poultry breeding project with one of Australia's leading organic chicken producers. The aim being to develop alternative, slower growing meat chicken strains, specifically suited to Australian conditions, and in keeping with the Australian organic certification standards. The over-arching aim of the project remains "optimal animal welfare and food quality". The valuable genetics were incorporated into the breeding programme, along with a diverse range of Australian heritage table poultry strains.

During his 37 years of poultry breeding experience, Michael has been privileged to be mentored by some of Australia's 'old-timer' poultry breeders, and the project utilises this traditional knowledge. It has also deliberately maintained a diverse 'palette' of genetics, rather than truncating them, to be able to respond to various production environments and market demands. A good example being the Sommerlad naked neck strains, that have a greater level of heat tolerance.

Believing in the many benefits of supporting small-scale local producers, we have chosen to work with a team of family farmers, promoting the benefits of alternative genetics in natural chicken farming environments, and "best-practice" poultry production. Whilst it is not free from complications, we are very grateful for the support and feedback we receive, and are firmly convinced of the opportunity for artisan chicken farmers to promote their unique terroir, and produce premium table birds for niche markets.

We recognise that the project in its current form has little impact on the lives of the millions of chickens consumed each week in Australia. However, we believe it is inevitable that Australia will eventually follow suit on emerging trends in Europe and America regarding chicken welfare and demands for "slower growing genetics", and the associated certification requirements. We believe the value contained in this project provides the potential to form an alliance with an Australian poultry integrator to effect positive welfare changes on a larger scale.

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