

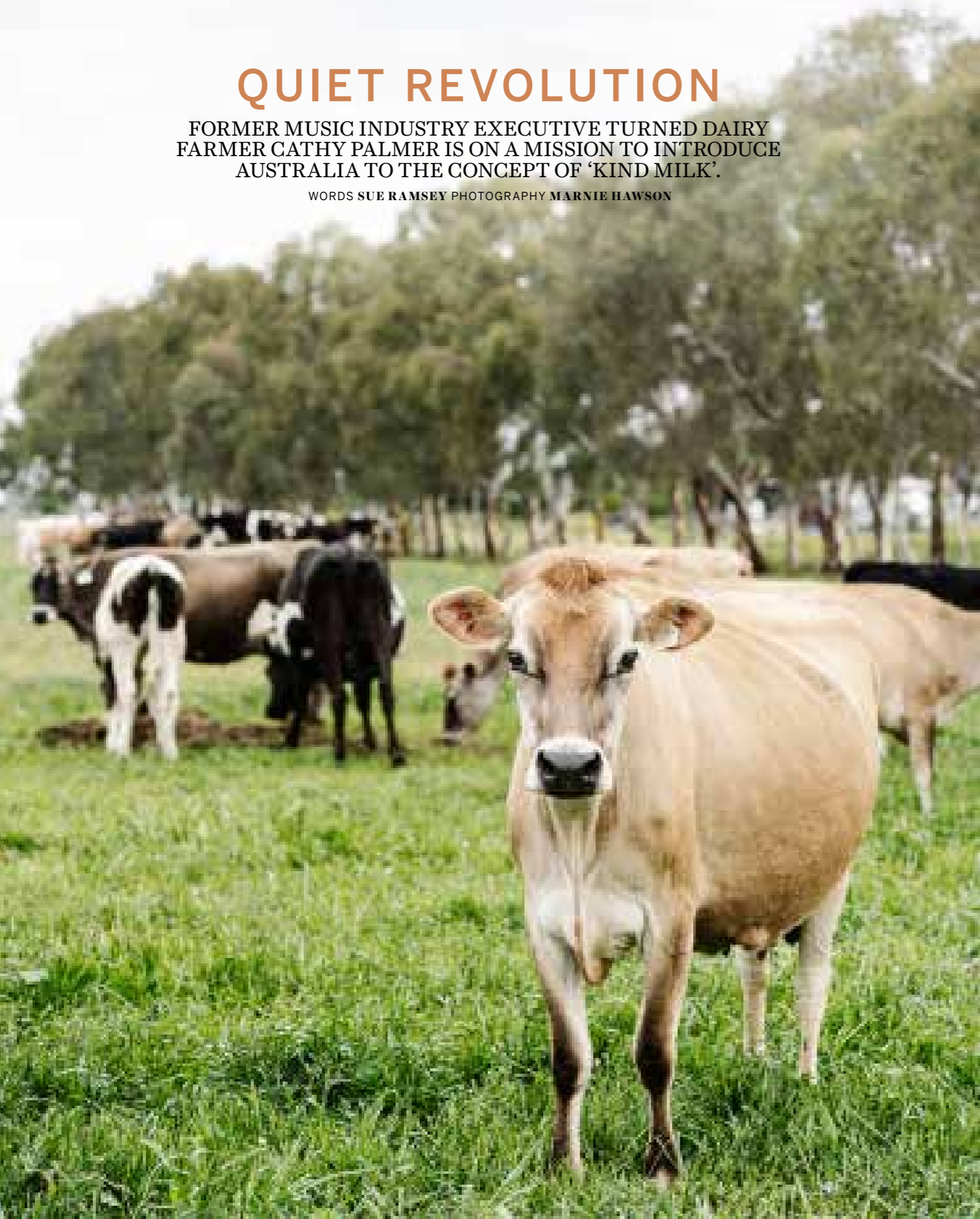
PEOPLE KATAMATITE VIC

The happy herd at How Now Dairy.
FACING PAGE Micro-dairy farmer Cathy
with her daughter Mia, 18, mum Mary
and GiGi the miniature dachshund.

QUIET REVOLUTION

FORMER MUSIC INDUSTRY EXECUTIVE TURNED DAIRY
FARMER CATHY PALMER IS ON A MISSION TO INTRODUCE
AUSTRALIA TO THE CONCEPT OF 'KIND MILK'.

WORDS SUE RAMSEY PHOTOGRAPHY MARNIE HAWSON



PEOPLE KATAMATITE VIC

Cathy and her 'girls' in the paddock.
FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP
LEFT At How Now Dairy, the calves stay
with their mums; a bovine beauty; How
Now's 'kind milk'; Mary overcame her
initial fear to get up close to Cathy's cows.

WHEN CATHY PALMER STARTED How Now Dairy five years ago at Congupna in northern Victoria, she knew one thing – she wanted to do dairy farming differently. She had just left her job in the music industry and was passionate about improving animal welfare. “The current practice in dairy is to remove a newborn calf within 24 hours,” explains Cathy. “These calves are kept in sheds and often fed powdered milk through machines and then sent to slaughter at five days old.” So she set out to create change by establishing a micro-dairy farm where calves could remain with their mothers, with the idea of ‘cow and calf should stay together’ as its central ethos.

“I bought the cows after much umming and ahing because I didn’t know how to start,” says Cathy. Those 18 Jersey cows were all in calf and had four or five months to go. So Cathy began researching in earnest to see how she could do things in a kinder, more ethical way, with the aim of maximising animal health and wellbeing.

“When we started, the first girl had her calf and was fiercely protective,” she says. “So we just left her and the calf alone for two or three days.” Then when it came to milking, a ‘flat’ milking shed on the farm proved invaluable. “A lot of dairies have a pit, so you’re eyeballing the teats at that level,” explains Cathy. “But this was on the flat and the girls were on the same level as us, and it was just five little milking stations. So I carried the calf over and Mum just followed naturally. I popped the calf on the ground in front of Mum and milked her, and that was the beginning of How Now.

From that cow, I’ve never taught another cow into the system – they just teach each other and they’re amazing.”

In terms of managing the farm day to day, Cathy says she got lucky. “On the farm itself I’ve got two adorable brothers – John and Ken Trimby – who are both retired dairy farmers,” she says. When Cathy needed to move from the original property in Congupna, Ken offered to lease her part of his land near Katamatite. “So now the two brothers run the farm for me and they have those intergenerational skill sets that have been disappearing. They love the cows, they’re extremely patient, and the vet bills disappear.”

Cathy’s daughter Mia, 18, has also played an invaluable role in the business. “Mia’s been a trouper and she’s a little dynamo at the farmers’ markets,” says Cathy. Her mother, Mary, has also been very involved. “She helped buy cows for me and helped me when I had to move. Mum just believed this was a really important job I was doing. It does feel like a calling and Mum has been really supportive of that.”

How Now uses regenerative farming practices and has introduced developing technologies such as “nitrate-munching bugs”, “rainmaking microbes” and a soil system to introduce new species. The cows roam on 40 hectares of natural pastures with access to lots of well-established trees. “Because it’s been such an amazing season, the girls are living on the pastures, which is really great. We haven’t been able to do that for years,” says Cathy. “Because I don’t standardise the milk, you’ve got to manage that through what they eat. Spring pastures can make the milk smell >

“The heroes for me are always the cows. They have that faith in me to do the right thing.”



KATAMATITE VIC PEOPLE

One of Cathy's happy cows with her calf. **FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT** How Now's artisanal cheeses; farm managers Ken (left) and John Trimby; Mary with one of the cows; the herd feeds on lush pastures.



very grassy, so I balance that with a bit of dry matter in the paddock for them.” As a result of its farming practices, How Now’s milk contains zero antibiotics and is low in stress hormones, thanks to its contented cows.

At present, Cathy says How Now is one of only a handful of dairy farms in the world producing ‘kind milk’. Interest is growing, however price can be an issue. “I’ve watched people in the supermarket and they’ll buy their premium pasture-fed chicken, free-range eggs, crate-free pork, and then walk round the corner and grab their two litres of milk without blinking an eye,” she says. “We call it ‘white water’, except water’s more expensive – 600ml of water will cost you four dollars, but 600ml of milk, you’ll be lucky if it costs you a dollar.”

In addition to its ‘kind milk’, How Now has added cheese to its product range, with the help of two artisan cheesemakers – Jack Holman from Stone & Crow Cheese in the Yarra Valley, and Nardia Baxter from Goldfields Farmhouse Cheese in Ballarat. “I take the approach with my business of ‘it takes a village,’” says Cathy. “I don’t want to be buying a big manufacturing plant – I want this to be people coming in and taking ownership of different parts of it.”

In 2019, How Now Dairy was awarded the Banksia Small Business Award, and it was while preparing her application for this that Cathy became aware of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. “It gave me the opportunity to step out of my business and review it with

different eyes, to make further commitment and drive for my future goals,” she says. “I’m not perfect – I acknowledge this is a journey and funds play a big role. But I keep my application close and revisit it regularly.”

True to her original intentions, Cathy has kept her herd small. “I’m milking 53 at the moment,” she says. “I’ve got probably 100 total in my herd because I calve all year round, other than the heat. And I’ve got very mixed ages in my herd, which is unusual. Most dairy cows are done and dusted before they’re five or six, but I’ve got a cow, Narc, who’s got to be nearly 15, that we’ve talked about retiring for three years, but she keeps wanting to come back to the dairy.”

And Cathy’s ‘kind’ approach has reaped other benefits. “My girls behave differently. There’s no rushing or running anywhere. I’ve learnt to walk very slowly these days – no arms waving around or loud sounds,” she says. “My golden rule is ‘ask the girls, don’t tell’ – this has become our mantra. And they pay me back in spades. If a cow is kicking in the dairy, there’s something wrong; if she doesn’t want to go somewhere it’s because she’s scared. So we need to work alongside them, respect them, and always treat them with kindness.

“The heroes for me are always the cows,” says Cathy. “They have that faith in me to do the right thing. I’m just speaking on their behalf a lot of the time. The beauty is in them.”

For more, visit hownowdairy.com.au or follow Cathy on Instagram @hownowdairyau



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