

INVESTING IN PEOPLE: A YOUNG GROWER'S GUIDE TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



Mark Geuze is bringing fresh thinking into an industry where workers are traditionally employed for a few months through the year.

Social responsibility figures large in his ideals, although the reason he treats the workers so well, on the Gisborne orchards he owns and manages, is just because it makes sense to him.

Mark Geuze is a 27-year old and is very The third-generation orchardist is passionate about kiwifruit – he manages more than 20ha of mostly Gold3 and has just set up his own 1.5ha block – and is also a big believer in the potential of youth.

That's hardly surprising, given he's only just turned 27 himself, but he's managed to combine both endeavours, employing a number of young locals to help run his family business.

"They're helping us every day, so I'll do anything I can to help them," Mark explains. "We're trying to keep young people in a job all year round - that's our main goal – and trying to provide them with an income they can support a family with."

That means he sometimes has to get creative, incorporating citrus and grape plantings on family blocks to keep his workers busy.

"If I can provide them with a good amount of hours each week, they don't get themselves into a financial rut, they're happy and they work hard."

Those permanent staff now number seven, although he still brings seasonal staff in during thinning and harvest. Younger brother William also works in the family business, operating machinery.

The family business recently expanded their operation, buying a 15ha block of grapes with a small holding of Gold3, which Mark is enthusiastic about managing.

The 3ha of Chardonnay and 5ha of Pinot Gris vines will be swapped over to Sauvignon Blanc, although Mark has more altruistic plans for the grapes.

"Our main focus is not grapes, it's kiwifruit, with the option of using our staff in the times when it's wet in the kiwifruit to do grapes. It spreads the workload."

Contagious enthusiasm

Seth Robertson's smoke break consists of a pot of yoghurt and last night's salad, a quick chat, and then he's heading back out the shed door.

It's not that he's on the clock or that his boss Mark is hovering, making sure he doesn't slack off; the 22-year-old Robertson is running under his own schedule, which involves getting back out under the vines as soon as he can.

It appears Mark's passion for the hairy berry is infectious; Robertson recently took on his own block to manage, under the watchful eye of his benevolent boss.

"The main thing I've noticed with Mark is that he works with us - he's not someone who gives instructions and then leaves," Robertson says. "He really gets involved, makes sure we're on track and he's in there constantly, right beside us."

Robertson was at school with William Geuze but entered the workforce unsure where he was heading, filling time in restaurants and doing odd jobs, until he started down the horticulture path.

"I knew pretty quickly it was what I wanted to do. It's been really good with Mark getting his own block, as it's interesting to see how it all starts off. When I get the money, I'm getting my own block, definitely."

Getting started

Jacob Geuze, an 86-year-old born in Holland and Mark's grandfather, was involved in setting up Gisborne kiwifruit orchards during the 1980s boom, riding through the subsequent crash, and staying involved in the industry up until recent years.

Mark's parents started cultivating grapes years later but when viticulture started slumping, ripped the vines out and began planting kiwifruit.

Mark, meanwhile, left Lytton High School and headed to Massey University, coming away with a Bachelor of Science with a double major in horticultural science and plant biology.

He started managing his own orchards, then thought "Why am I working by myself when I could be doing more working with other people?"

Back working on the family block, he made an early call to graft over Hort16A to Gold3, started introducing Bruno root-stock, and started employing Gisborne locals.

“With the licence and set-up costs being so expensive, it’s worth growing a crop properly and having people who know what they’re doing. You’re much better off spending a lot more on labour and getting a really good crop. That’s also the benefit of keeping staff on all year - they get through to picking and they see the rewards from their hard work. We have discussions all the time when we’re working and they’ll come up with their own ideas and that’s why they enjoy it - because they feel like they’re a part of it.”

So what next?

Things are moving quickly for Mark these days – he’s just moved out of the caravan he’s called home for the last four years and moved into the house on his own property.

The bare block he’s set up is also taking plenty of his attention.

“That’s my weekend job,” he quips. “In my spare time.”

But he won’t take his eyes off his core role, conscious that there are many hungry mouths relying on the quality of his business decisions.

“Our business is expanding and we don’t shy away from paying people what they’re worth. That’s the good thing about a family business - if we make a good profit, the staff will get a good share of it.”

And he’s also got high hopes for Gold3 and the wider kiwifruit industry.

“Most young people don’t recognise the potential in horticulture but if you want to work hard and make something from it, the world’s your oyster.”