

**Thinking laterally gives this Rangitikei family farm a new lease on life, writes Jill Wild.**

# Fresh vision for life on the farm

**R**ANGITIKEI'S Kylie and Andrew Stewart are masters at conceptualising a big plan, working like maniacs and bringing it to fruition. In just over a year they have transformed their home and surrounding farm sheds into a thriving business.

Ironically, Rangitikei Farmstay wasn't even on the horizon when the pair married four years ago, and everyone was expecting they would settle into life on the farm. Much to the delight of the Stewart family – parents Hugh and Diana and two siblings – Andrew had taken over the 635-hectare farm and it seemed Tyrone, the farm that had been in the family for more than 100 years would remain in the Stewart family for another generation.

But, unbeknown to anyone Andrew was already having deep thoughts. Never one to be scared to think laterally and outside the square, a year after marrying he decided to lease out the farm, and travel overseas with Kylie to experience the world.

"Andrew's an intelligent, ideas man and one day he put the idea to me of leasing the farm out. Once we had the plan in place we ran the concept past Andrew's parents, but in the end it was Andrew's decision. I remember everyone thought we were mad," Kylie says.

In fact in 2003, the year Andrew took over the farm, the area was stricken with a drought and the following year devastated by flooding. The force of nature got him thinking and in a gradual and calculated process he finally determined the best course of action was to lease.

The couple started their overseas sojourn through Europe and then six months in the Cayman Islands where Kylie taught in an international school and finally a two-month overland trip through Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. "It was when we were staying in a farmhouse in South Africa and saw what they had done with their sheds that made me think we could do a similar thing," Kylie says.

Back home in the Rangitikei the bags had scarcely been opened when things swung into action. The day after they arrived home Kylie returned to teaching at Wanganui Girls' College with three extra responsibilities – head of the health and physical education department, the year 12 dean, and head of marketing for the school.

Andrew busied himself in real estate and at night they formulated a plan for the creation and development of



**Looking back:** The original homestead and out buildings before it was relocated, below, and the old homestead, above, on its new site, as accommodation and a farm museum.

Photos: MARCUS WILD



Rangitikei Farmstay. The first farm shed to be converted was the farm storeroom, stacked with "stuff" awaiting evaluation.

"There was an old toilet, sink, copper in the corner and farm stuff. We cleaned it out in the school holidays and I found there were really nice native floorboards underneath. Andrew did the lining and building changes and I did the painting."

They were keen to retain the "farm feel" to each of the buildings as they converted them, so kept the old copper, painted it black, installed a new vanity but kept the original overhead farm shower for the bathroom. With a queen bed and

interior fitout the eastern chalet was ready for guests just eight weeks after the renovation started and Rangitikei Farmstay was in business.

"We got people a lot quicker than we thought, in fact we only had one week's notice before some Germans arrived to stay in the eastern chalet. There were no curtains in the place and I rang around everywhere in Wanganui trying to find someone who would make blinds in just one week. I had to pay the earth for the blinds, three of them, but funnily enough I have had so many comments about them since, it's been worth the money."



**Dog gone:** Andrew spends a moment with his dog before meeting Kylie to spend five weeks on a farm tour in the United States.

Kylie reckons their international travel experience equipped them well for handling guests. She says without having experienced a little of the world it would be harder to understand their international clients' needs and expectations. "Those first guests, a couple of German men in their 60s sat down in the evening and had a drink with me, Andrew was still at work, and they said it had been a long time since they had shared a drink with a young blonde woman."

The original farm homestead was the next target for Kylie and Andrew. They had thought of either burning it down or putting it on Trade Me for a dollar.

"It had my horse covers and hay in it, I cleared all that out, ripped off the scrim and wallpaper, saw the native timber underneath and realised the possibilities in the building."

The stripping of the scrim and wallpaper was a job far larger than a full-time school teacher could achieve at the end of each school day and weekends.

Undaunted, Kylie searched online, found a German girl wanting to volunteer on a project in New Zealand and organised for

her and a second German volunteer to come to the farm, work and experience Kiwi life. "Friends said we were mad leaving two girls at home unsupervised while we both worked. But the girls grabbed the concept; they were amazing and they had the old homestead building stripped and cleaned out from floor to ceiling in five days, every bit of string from the scrim was gone. I told them they had to finish every day at 4pm when I got home and then we would do things together – go horse riding, trips around the farm, out for dinner, we treated them like family. Hilke was only going to stay a month but she ended up staying three months, she was really creative, we set off each other with ideas."

By late last year the former ancient farm homestead was resurrected, converted to a bunk house and farm museum and now sleeps nine people in two rooms with a cooking area and expansive deck the couple says is "made to party on".

The western chalet has had a few makeovers as its use has changed. It was initially a car shed which Kylie and Andrew lined, added exterior sliding doors and

converted to a gym and games room for guests. It has been co-opted for extra accommodation and with a huge window providing panoramic views down the valley and a queen bed and single bed, Kylie rates it as one of the best guest rooms.

When the traditional old farm killing shed was converted to the chook house a candelabra was unearthed. That is now in the western chalet and an old saw found under the homestead has been turned into a clock. "We don't buy anything, we just recycle things, everything is pre-loved," says Kylie.

The main farm home also accommodates guests in a further four bedrooms. The couple have kept one bathroom and bedroom for themselves but share the lounge with guests, and the kitchen is at the heart of good food and conversation. In total, 22 guests can be accommodated.

"Guests love to collect the eggs from the hens and then have them for breakfast, eat veges from the garden and we eventually plan to offer our own meat

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**Room for two:** The first building to be converted was the farm store shed which became accommodation.

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off the farm. That is the long-term plan, RF branded meat, but that will all happen when we take the farm back.” Until then Rangitikei Farmstay has a steady flow of guests, entertained and managed around Kylie’s fulltime teaching commitments at Wanganui Girls’ College and Andrew’s work as editor of rural magazine *Young Country*. “It wouldn’t have all come together and been possible without fantastic support and help from our families. Andrew’s dad does the most fantastic farm tours for guests and Andrew’s mum welcomes people and prepares meals.” Into the future the couple will take back the farm operation in 2012 all going well and Kylie confesses she is already eyeing up the one last shed for conversion. “I had always dreamed of doing alternative education, to help special needs kids or kids who have never experienced farm life. I had a kid here the other day who said ‘Miss, how long does it take you to mow the lawns?’ when she was standing in a paddock. She just had no idea about farm life, animals and paddocks and that’s what those kids can experience here.”

For more information go to: [rangitikeifarmstay.co.nz](http://rangitikeifarmstay.co.nz)



**At home:** The old store shed and homestead fit easily into the surrounds after renovation.



**Playing chicken:** The old farm meat safe now resurrected as the chook house.



**Bed time:** The old store shed door was stripped and the shed renovated to make accommodation suitable for a couple.



**Welcome home:** The ‘new’ home where farmstay guests are entertained with guest accommodation behind.



**Dining outlook:** The dining room table’s position offers expansive view down the valley.



**Bags of difference:** A cluster of old school and farm bags hang against the sarking walls in the old homestead, a part of the ‘museum’ created by Kylie.

**Fired up:** Guests are entertained around a big open fire and in the dining room.



**Hot stuff:** The farm laundry copper has become a feature in the store shed bathroom.



**Branching out:** One of the original trees stands tall over the farm gate entrance to Tyrone.



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