



Curing vanilla beans

Nipper our blue cattle dog

# Broken Nose Vanilla - Mt Bartle Frere via Mirriwinni

## 1. Name: Fiona George and Matt Allen DOB:1958,1957

### Who is in your farming family?

Fiona and I are vanilla farmers, we have two daughters, one still at home who is 14. We grow vanilla organically, and produce a range of unique niche products such as vanilla extract, vanilla honey, and vanilla balsamic vinegar. We work on the complete product, and organise our own packaging, marketing, promotions and horticultural trials.

Our farming family includes a blue cattle dog, 'Nipper', a tail-less 20 year old cat, 'Minor Detail' and of course our chooks.

### Where is your farm and what do you farm?

**Broken Nose Vanilla** is a relatively small farm located in the foothills of Queensland's tallest mountain, Mt Bartle Frere, near Mirriwinni. The farm overlooks the iconic 'Broken Nose' peak of the mountain – hence our business name.

### What is your farming background?

We are new to farming, although Fiona has training in horticulture. 10 years ago we moved away from city life and city jobs, bought a farm, did some research and began to grow vanilla. We believe this has given us our ability to look at farming with fresh eyes, we are keen to try alternatives and be innovative.

## 2. Farming Memories - What has been so special for you living on a family farm?

When we first came here we had a lot of snakes in the house and all around the place. We had two dogs at that stage and they had a snake bailed up one evening about 9 o'clock. It was just a night tiger, not a particularly dangerous snake. Fiona had gone out with nothing on but a T-shirt, I was taking my time inside, (hoping Fiona would sort it out without me). As I eventually dressed and walked outside, the dog grabbed the snake round the middle, flinging it up into the air. It landed perfectly around Fiona's shoulders - like a feather boa. Fiona's response was not to be frightened, she was just really annoyed. "You @\$!!! Dog," she screamed, as she unceremoniously removed the snake from her neck and threw it squarely back at the dog.



Shade structure and vanilla trellises

The point of the story is that we became fairly normalised to snakes, having come from a life with no snake experience. So if a snake dropped out of the ceiling while I am cooking, and that has happened, Fiona will just throw a pillow case over it and chuck it outside.

### 3. Farming Life Experiences - Family farming presents many challenges which often involve considerable effort to resolve. *What experiences can you recall which presented you and your family with a significant problem?*

We realised early on that cyclones were an issue. We had been on this farm only a week when Cyclone Larry (Category 5) hit. It destroyed most things but left a one metre buffer above the ground with little damage. That settled it, we would grow vanilla, keeping our crop low to the ground and hopefully protected against future cyclones.

We developed a trellising technique that could be quickly dropped to the ground in the event of a cyclone, and quickly put back up afterwards, thereby protecting the vanilla vines from damage and getting us back into production straight afterwards. The shade structures can blow away, we don't care, but the trellis design protects the crop, it worked well in Yasi. In fact, we just won an award for 'Tropical Innovation' for our simple but effective design made from wire and a fence strainer.

Problem solving relies on lateral thinking, you need to observe and be prepared to adapt. Maybe that is easier for us because we are new to farming and new to the area....we don't take a lot of things for granted.

### 4. Looking Back - What lessons were learnt? What has your farming life taught you?

We approached the farm as a business rather than just something we have inherited. We have given it a good amount of planning - What were our skills and resources? What could we learn to do as a family? What infrastructure could we afford, and so on?

Firstly, you need to understand the environment you are farming in and match **what you farm** and **how you farm** with that – rather than approaching it the other way round – like, “I'm gonna be a cattle farmer and try to make the environment fit that.” You need a holistic understanding of the whole thing.

Cooking with vanilla

