

CANTER VALLEY



I have been buying and cooking Canter Valley ducks for years. When I started my cooking career, duck was in relatively short supply in New Zealand and not seen on a lot of menus besides Asian. This has completely changed these days as supply is far greater and duck is now a fairly common sight on menus up and down the country. I have always enjoyed all kinds of duck, and as a child often dined on dry-roasted wild birds that we would hunt in season. Let's make it absolutely clear though: the only similarity between wild varieties and commercially raised birds is that they both quack!

Once again, it was great to make the connection and complete the full circle of understanding about where and how the birds were farmed before reaching me plucked, eviscerated, and ready for the knife.

Lachlan Dick, who owns and runs the operation, made the shift from traditional sheep, beef and venison farming about a decade ago because he wanted more control over the process from paddock to plate.

It was fascinating to be shown through this well-run business. We started with the duck eggs, which are held at a cool temperature until required. Once needed, the eggs are vertically stacked in

warm incubators for 28 days, then for three days in horizontal hatchery trays, from where they hatch. The cutest of cute ducklings are then kept in heated rooms until their feathers develop and they are old enough to venture through to the big finishing barn.

The finishing barns were clean, spacious and open-sided for air circulation and the birds healthy, in great condition and content. There were no cages. There was constant grain for them to feed on and clean, cold water. Lachlan is clearly proud of his operation and gets immense pleasure from raising happy, great-tasting ducks.

The ducks are also killed humanely and processed on-site in a new, modern and efficient abattoir. Every part of the duck is sold except for the feathers. The local Chinese market takes the feet, tongues and the gizzard. There is a great demand for the fat and the livers, and of course the legs and the breasts, plus whole birds are sold throughout the country.

I purchased some legs and breasts. My mind was not completely made up, but because duck is such a special meat to serve, almost celebratory or 'royal', it felt like a great fit for this regal province.

Interestingly enough, only female ducks quack – now there's a surprise!