

“I think the association is going to be really important over the next three years while farmers’ markets are enjoying this growth period. We may not be stimulating the growth but we can help markets be sustainable so that they are not just a flash in the pan while they are fashionable and then die away to nothing.”

Protection of the farmers’ market values is a high priority for Thomas. “As farmers’ markets become fashionable, we need to protect and preserve their authenticity; it may get to the stage where we need to certify markets. Though New Zealand has not had the major food scares that Europe has had, for example, New Zealand consumers still want to know where their food comes from and who’s producing it.”

Though strong on philosophy and full of enthusiasm, Thomas finds that it is the day-to-day running of the association that takes up most of Thomas’s time.

“The FMNZ association is providing good resources for it’s members. We have produced a farmer’s market handbook which is a great resource for managers and we are in a process of producing a vendor’s handbook. It is quite involved and outlines not only what to do at a market but also how to use the market to build businesses elsewhere. It will be a good tool for managers to pass onto their new stallholders.”

## Ian Thomas – hatching new plans for farmers' markets

Lesley Wilson talks to the first chairman of the NZ Farmers' Market Association  
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Marrying a Kiwi girl while he was working in Italy, a downturn in farming returns in New Zealand and one night where there was no cold beer in the fridge have all led Welshman Ian Thomas to his current position as first Chairman of the Farmers' Market New Zealand Association and, along with his wife Lesley, the owner of 'The other Side Free Range Chook Farm'.

Ian grew up in west Wales and has worked on farms since he was twelve. "I worked weekends and holidays and after leaving school, I spent four years at the Seale Hayne Agricultural College in Wales. After graduating, I worked on all sorts of farms and in the late '80s I went travelling – and never went back."

He spent a little time in France and then moved to Italy for three and a half years. It was here that he met and married Hawkes Bay girl Lesley Reynolds.

"In 1991, Lesley and I came to New Zealand to live in Patoka with her parents. There was no money in farming so Lesley's mother decided that it would be a good idea to produce eggs for sale; that's where it all began."

The Thomases started with around 300 pullets on the family farm in Patoka, but by 2003, the operation had moved to the outskirts of Hastings and had grown to over 18,000 pullets.

"At the start, there were no free range eggs for sale anywhere and there was a little bit of education to be done to explain what free range meant. There was a latent awareness of how eggs were produced, however – one dairy owner told me it was illegal to produce eggs this way and that the hens had to be caged! We initially found markets by driving to potential outlets with eggs in the boot of our car."

Their hard work paid off and their efforts, alongside other free-range eggs producers across New Zealand, have increased the market share to about 9% of the total market. "This is relatively low compared to other countries," says Thomas, "But if you take into account that 4% of all hens in new Zealand are kept by people in their backyard, this increases the consumption of free range eggs considerably."

The past couple of years have seen many changes to the Thomas farming operation. "We have now downsized to concentrate on the local market because the business model surrounding 18,000 pullets didn't really work. Eggs are fragile and expensive to freight, and supermarkets require at least five days a week service. There is no profitability in that market."

With the focus now on the local market, Thomas was now primed for involvement in a farmers' market environment.

Six years ago, the CEO of Sileni Wines, Graeme Avery, called a meeting to explain the whole idea of a Hawkes Bay Wine Country farmers' market and food trails. Avery invited people who were already involved in food production and tourism in the region. Though Ian was invited, a difficult day on the farm meant he was only looking forward to a night in with a cold beer. However, when the fridge proved to be empty, he decided to go to the meeting instead. By the end of the meeting, he was hooked into Avery's vision.

"Graeme was very enthusiastic and explained the business incubation aspect of a farmers' market. By the end of the meeting, I was on the steering committee with 15 other people who had also got enthused. This meeting was held in July 2000 and by October we held our first farmers' market."

Farmers' Market New Zealand (FMNZ) was incorporated in November 2005 and Thomas was elected as Chairman. Although not a prescribed role, Thomas sees himself working with the other members to show leadership and direction.

"I guess I am the first point of contact. However I worked closely with Marlborough members Chris Fortune (Vice-Chairman) and Jenny Crumb (Treasurer). We divvy up the jobs according to time, availability and skills."

Thomas believes the benefits of belonging to a farmers' market are easy to outline but the challenge is to maintain the momentum of the current environment.