

Rearing rabbits brings rewards

By JULIE PAUL

WHEN the Chinese New Year was celebrated at the beginning of the month, it ushered in the Year of the Rabbit.

This may well be a good omen for Chris and Mignonne Bushell, of Bushmin Farmed Rabbits at Long Plains, near Mallala.

Their business has been hopping ahead to the extent that they sometimes find it hard to meet demand for their home-bred and processed rabbits.

After calicivirus was introduced in the 1990s to reduce Australia's rabbit population, the laws on farming rabbits were eased and it was legalised in 2001. Chris and Mignonne began Bushmin the following year and business has thrived.

"We began with just rabbits," Chris said. "After a while we decided to diversify a bit, so we introduced Damara lambs onto the property."

"We like to have a slightly different product, and the Damaras have no odour at all and a really excellent flavour."

"They are chemical-free, fed on saltbush and don't need to be shorn or mulesed. We smoke the lamb and provide various cuts and sausages."

"We then brought in some wild goats from the Flinders Ranges, which we also process, and some pork from the Adelaide Plains."

The rabbits remain their biggest seller, with Mignonne supervising the breeding program and Chris playing a big role in the slaughterhouse, processing and value-adding plant.

Rabbit products they supply include redgum-smoked legs, rabbits marinated in red wine and garlic, rabbit schnitzels, sausages, various portions and whole rabbits. Chris enjoys the challenge of finding new products and ways to value-add.

"We started with Flemish Giants," Chris said. "But now we use mainly a mixed breed developed through the 'Crusader' rabbit program, in conjunction with the CSIRO."

"Contrary to popular belief, they are not particularly prolific breeders and we are going down the artificial insemination path to boost our numbers – we produce about 300 each week."

The rabbits are all kept in air-conditioned housing, using five sheds and two eco-shelters.

"There is no point trying free-range, but our animals have roomy cages and are fed specially-prepared rabbit pellets to keep them on a balanced diet," Chris said.



Mignonne Bushell (above) gives a cuddle to one of the breeding rabbits. (Inset) they are so cute – but also make great eating, particularly after Chris's value-adding expertise.



"They are also immunised against calicivirus."

Chris and Mignonne sell through the Adelaide Showground and Sevenhill farmers' markets. "It's the best way to keep in touch with your customers and get feedback on your product," Chris said.

To date, they have been finalists in the Premier's Food Awards five times, as well as winning the Adelaide Plains Emu Award for local business and the SA Great Award for Innovation.

• Need to know | 8-9 of 2 | bushmin@bigpond.com