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NZ's largest piggery has community in mind

**NZ
PORK**

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Page 1 of 4

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Nearly 100,000 pigs are raised each year at the nation's largest piggery in North Canterbury, **Tim Cronshaw** writes.

MOTORISTS catching a glimpse of the 1868 Hurunui Hotel on State Highway 7 would never know they have just gone past New Zealand's largest pig farming operation.

Off a small backcountry road is Patoa Farms, a vast 500ha farm producing 95,000 pigs a year for pork consumption at Hawarden, in North Canterbury.

Patoa hasn't been around for as long as the heritage-listed hotel, but is making a lasting impression.

The business owned by the Sterne family is an important linchpin for the surrounding small community, employing more than 50 staff and contributing about \$4 million in wages to the local economy.

A long access road weaves past breeding sows and their litters free-ranging in paddocks neatly laid out in a grid pattern.

At the midway point are rows and rows of large barns for finishing young pigs.

The road stops at Patoa's headquarters, with the machinery shed housing a fleet of tele-handlers and tractors to the left and the offices and smoko room to the right.

Inside, South African-raised Tjaart Grove is wearing a brilliant Hawaiian shirt. It is casual Friday and the breeding herd manager is well known for taking the relaxed dress code seriously.

Mr Grove said the Sternes were good employers with strong values who often gave back to the local community.

This extends to supplying pigs for the Meat the Need charitable

organisation to help put food on tables for low income families.

He said this generosity tied in with the business' vision statement of pig farming with excellence to "bless our people, community and industry partners".

"So part of our ethos is to help where we can and to be a blessing for the area around us. We have between 55 to 60 people working here and we have stock people in the breeding area and grower unit and we have a fulltime mechanic, a fulltime engineer and maintenance guy, admin staff and a butcher here as we provide staff with meat throughout the year."

Two staff received awards for 20 years' service at the past Christmas function and another has served 15 years.

Employees regularly go on courses to further themselves, and job offers are made to those wanting to turn their lives around after making mistakes in their younger years.

Part of the appeal for Mr Grove is working with people from many different cultures.

"It's bright shirt Friday day today and we have people from maybe eight or nine different countries here and there are some Kiwis and it makes it fun learning about different cultures. They live here now in Culverden, Hawarden, Waikari, Amberley, Rotherham and Waiau and they have made a life here because of Patoa. We certainly employ a lot of people in the community."

Steve Sterne and daughter Holly Davies oversee the large complex. From a background in the steel industry Mr Sterne came to pig farming as a friend was involved.

About 27 years later and the North Canterbury farmer is

being honoured for his dedication to excellence in the industry.

Last month he received the Outstanding Contribution Award at NZPork's annual conference in Christchurch.

At the time, chief executive Brent Kleiss described his pursuit of excellence, quality, sustainability and pig welfare as second to none.

Mr Sterne prefers to remain out of the spotlight. He bought the large block of land bordering the Hurunui River which Patoa now calls home with co-founder Jens Ravn in 1998. Following the latter moving on to sheep farming in 2013, Mr Sterne continued the farm operation.

More lately, he has stepped back, putting in a management team to carry out the day-to-day running of the business and moving to a governance role.

Mrs Davies has carried on the family legacy, specialising in its financial oversight, and sits on the board as a director.

Attending the same church as Mr Grove, it was she who convinced him to be part of Patoa.

After growing up on his family's cropping farm and studying agriculture in South Africa, Mr Grove worked on dry stock, beef and ostrich farms.

Arriving in New Zealand, he started off managing a Taranaki chicken farm in 2006 and went back to study to become a quantity surveyor for 10 years before the pull of farming returned and he moved to Patoa in 2017.

At his desk he carefully



01 SEP, 2025

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NZ
PORK

Page 2 of 4

thumbs through old and new layout maps.

Over the passage of time they show the course of many improvements made to the operation.

“We have gone through a whole redevelopment and I’ve got some old maps which show we used to have quite a different layout of the farm. Basically in the middle now is our lactation area and around it like a horse-shoe sits all of our dry sow paddocks. So once we wean [the sows] we AI them and put them in the dry sow paddocks because they are not lactating and they wait until they are ready to farrow and they come back into the middle. It’s a really good system.”

Mr Grove said Patoa had opted to have its breeding sow herd in the open.

That suits him as he enjoys working in the fresh air, watching the seasons turn and taking in the mountains in the background during his daily walk through the paddocks.

“I like farming outside and farming pigs for a start. Part of it is being outside here, but for me it’s more about the environment, seeing piglets running around. There is no right or wrong reason and this is what we’ve set out to do and the model we’ve created and it works for the business.”

Criticism by animal groups of indoor facilities was not as simple as painted as the pigs were in optimum conditions under controlled temperatures, whereas piglet mortality was higher in outdoor settings under exposed elements, he said. “Everyone can have their opinion, but we know we are doing the best we can and I think that’s true for most farmers whether you are in an indoor or outdoor farm.”

At any one stage there are about 45,000 pigs, weaners, growers and sows with their piglets of varying stages and ages on the farm.

Patoa’s 5500 breeding sows roam free range with small

shelters in large paddocks for farrowing.

Many gravel lanes criss-cross the large property to access the breeding paddocks and so plentiful are they that Patoa has its own quarry to surface them. At each intersection are stop signs.

The sows have about six farrowings over two and a-half years before they are replaced by the next generation of mothering pigs.

From the two to three litters produced per sow over a year, about 10.5 piglets are weaned from each litter.

In the past some sows have managed to put out 18 piglets and in some cases beyond this to more than 20 newborns.

Mr Grove said these numbers were too many as they did not have enough teats to suckle all of them. So some piglets were fostered to other sows.

Sows were amazing mothers, inquisitive and intelligent animals with a sharp memory, responding well to gentle treatment and easy to farm for their size. Knowing he had played a part in raising them and seeing them thrive was satisfying, he said.

The piglets are weaned between three to four weeks after being born. The offspring from commercial sows are separated after three weeks, while the gilts — “new mums” — have their smaller litters weaned after four weeks, as do the nucleus herd bearing the next line of breeding replacements.

From the breeding paddocks they move to long rows of grower units consisting of 63 smaller nursery sheds, each taking about 180 piglets, and then into 30 larger auto-sort sheds.

At the nurseries each intake is vaccinated and split into males and females.

Larger males and females are again split off to control their growth and prevent smaller piglets being dominated.

For the next eight weeks they will stay in the nursery sheds before moving on to finishing

sheds for another 10 weeks.

They start off on meal and progress later to high-energy pellets in seven specially formulated diets based on their age while they go through the two-stage grower unit.

Patoa buys the raw materials for this feed which is stored at a Rangiora milling plant before being made to recipes designed by their veterinarian.

In any given week the pigs consume 550 tonnes of feed, a logistical exercise to keep it rolling through.

Once the young pigs leave the nursery they progress to the larger “auto-sort” sheds — so named as scales automatically weigh them as they go through to the feed court and sort them out when they get to sale-ready weight.

After a total of 18 weeks in the sheds, large green Merlo telehandlers are used to move grower pigs in crates to a loading area where they walk off to a truck to be transported to Ashburton and Cheviot meat processors.

This is where Patoa’s part in the supply chain ends with the processed ham, bacon, chops, sausages, roasts, mince and other cuts bound for domestic consumption.

By this stage the grower pigs have reached between 86kg to 90kg liveweight which equates to 76kg on the hook.

Patoa produces its own replacement stock, introducing about 60 gilts a week to the breeding system.

A nucleus herd of purebred lines is in another area to replace purebred stock and to cross-breed for piglets which will become commercial sows.

Genetic improvement is carried out by pig breeders PIC New Zealand and Waratah Farm which provides semen for artificial insemination.

Patoa’s breeding programme relies on AI and natural mating. Gilts are mated as new mothers to boars when they are in heat in weekly cycles. Normally they go back into cycle within five days after their first litter is weaned.



01 SEP, 2025

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Otago Daily Times, Dunedin



Page 3 of 4

Then AI is used for their next litter round alongside the mixed-age sows.

Small groups of boars go with them for 21 days to follow up the 20% yet to become impregnated.

Mr Grove said working for Mr Sterne was an easy decision because of his values, leadership, innovation and many achievements within the pig industry.

Mr Sterne's development of markets and building an operation of such scale had removed some of the highs and lows in the meat schedule, while he had a big influence on many people's lives because of the job opportunities he had created, he said.

"When I lived on a very

remote farm right on the border of South Africa and Botswana there was in the end a few big international people who came and bought land because it was reasonably cheap in their eyes.

"What happened was they bought two or three farms to make one farm therefore taking three or four people from the community and all of a sudden there was no need for the local store. This is probably quite the opposite."

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Aloha . . . South African-born Tjaart Grove is Patoa Farms' breeding herd manager at the nation's largest pig farm and is often seen wearing a carefree Hawaiian shirt on casual Fridays. PHOTOS: TIM CRONSHAW



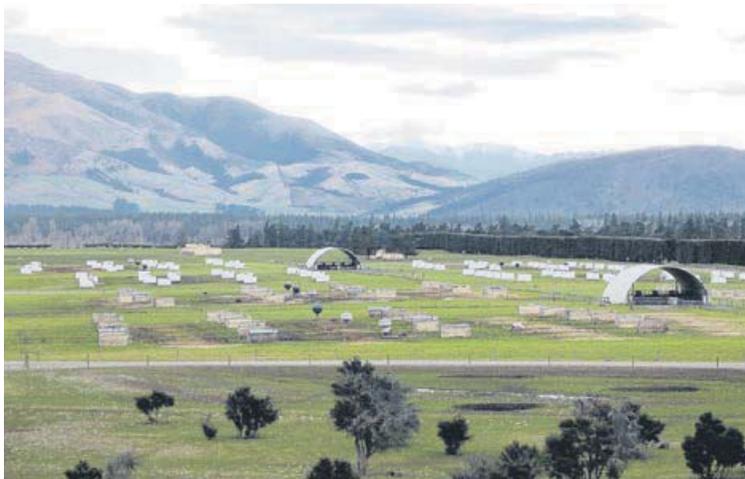
01 SEP, 2025

NZ's largest piggery has community in mind

Otago Daily Times, Dunedin



Page 4 of 4



Cross-cross . . . A grid layout of lactation and dry sow paddocks offers a centralised system for easier access, feeding and managing sows and their piglets at Patoa Farms in North Canterbury.



Free range . . . Piglets roam in free range paddocks with their sows at North Canterbury's Patoa Farms until they are weaned at three to four weeks.