

From Humble Beginnings

By Sue Richards, Surico Alpaca.

On a recent trip to Chile I was reminded very much of our humble beginnings into alpacas, as we stopped at a check point and an alpaca came up and stuck its head through the window. It looked exactly like our Roany [her real name F47] I am sure it was related.

We still have 3 old girls, Roany, Frosty and Barrel, all named when we first set eyes on them. They live in retirement in the paddock with the best view of Lake Rotorua on the farm, above our house, and survey all comings and goings in the yards. They wander down every morning for their nuts, the only alpacas on our farm to get a regular ration, and maybe chew a bit of hay. On the ledge of the hayrack is a row of rolls of chewed cud, I guess their teeth aren't what they used to be.



Roany & Frosty Enjoy the view from their paddock

Originally we bought 15 pregnant females, mostly "past their use by date", all pregnant, but no guarantees, was the marketing jargon from Ag research. Of those, 8 were born in Chile and others were some of the first cria born in NZ. All had cria that first year and went on to have many more. Velvet had a cria every year in April for 8 years, although only one was a female. They led a stress free life and roamed over 60 acres of sand, ti tree and very poor grassland with almost no fencing and we never called a vet.

Roany, Frosty and Barrel are the only ones left from Chile and have been retired from breeding, but most of the others are still around. Although they are really good examples of Mike Safley's primitive alpaca, some would say ugly, they have some redeeming qualities, not least longevity and health. Their colours were vibrant and micron not too bad, some still 25 and 26 at last shearing, but density!! They never shored more than a kilo.

I promised the old girls that it would be their last move when we shifted our operation to Rotorua. They had come from Chile as young females to the bottom of the South Is, then moved to the top of the North Is, [Spitta and Gringo had cria 5 days later] where we lived at the time, then to Rotorua for their twilight years.

We have sold their progeny over the years and they made us a reasonable income. We learnt so much, they were very tolerant tutors.

They were the catalyst for our move into suris, we started with colour. We soon realised that we needed to improve our herd. Alpacas being imported now had origins in Peru and were being improved greatly. We had to do something.



A herd of top quality suri bred at Surico

So we thought lets do something different. Suris were unknown in NZ and we had never seen one, but Brooke who is an avid reader had read all about how rare and valuable they were. A friend sent a newspaper clipping saying some had come to the South Is, a guy called Russell Nelson. We headed off to Australia and went to their National Show in Tatura, Shepparton to look and visit some alpaca studs.

It wasn't long and we were hooked, we bought a coloured suri male, Roberto [he lives in the back paddock now] and some coloured suri females. All

the alpacas we had purchased thus far, we had never seen, not that it would have made any difference as we didn't really know what to look for anyway. It is a far cry from first time purchasers now days, who have the luxury of available information in magazines, conferences, websites, workshops. shows and farm visits.

For us, now was the time to get serious, make informed decisions and get into the real alpaca world. We still wanted suris and with Hermione just returned from Peru, impassioned, and ready to join the obsession with her salary, we embarked on a plan to breed quality white suri. Our first purchase was from Jill Short, Surilana, Australia's leading suri breeder. She presented us with pens of beautiful suri and told us to go ahead and choose. Given our inexperience we found it an impossible task and had to ask her to help. We have found in buying alpacas when we didn't have enough experience we have chosen the people rather than the alpacas, and it has worked for us.

Shortly after we sold most of our coloured suri females to finance more white suris and take shares in some Accoyo males, which are now farmed on our property. It is with extreme pride and joy that we now watch some of the most beautiful suri cria frolic on our hillsides.

Last week we went to the AANZ conference in Dunedin thinking how far we had come, but were reminded how little we really know about alpacas, how much we have to learn and how much we need to keep learning, never to give up the opportunity to attend a field day, a show, a workshop, let alone a conference, to always take the opportunity to look at a fleece or a new cria, be it suri or huacaya.

We feel very fortunate to have been part of the development of such an exciting and dynamic industry so far and look forward to continuing with the same enthusiasm that we see shining in new breeders faces.