

*How To Be A  
Perfect Farm Wife*

Lorna Sixsmith

Sample chapter

## HOW TO STAY MARRIED

No one gets married with plans to divorce, and with their immense affection for the land, farmers in particular want their relationships to last and their children to inherit. Prenuptial agreements are all very well, but couples with happy marriages have farm businesses that thrive.<sup>26</sup>

### *How to recognise a compliment*

Farmers don't tend to be big talkers and certainly don't offer tributes or praise very often. Indeed, unless you know how to recognise a farmer's compliment, you may miss it completely.

#### *Examples of compliments:*

- 🐾 “If you were a beef heifer, I'd be doing well.” – He doesn't mind that you've put on a bit of weight.
- 🐾 “That cake is nearly as good as my mother's.” – High praise indeed.
- 🐾 “The bit of weight suits you.” – Hmmm, is it said with a sarcastic tone?

- ♪ “You can run faster than I thought.” – Goodness, that’s a good tribute especially if you were running after cattle or sheep.
- ♪ “That was a grand dinner.” – Getting such flattery on your cooking means you should enter that dish in every suitable competition going.
- ♪ “You’re a hardy woman.” – This doesn’t necessarily mean that you are physically strong but that you are astute, work smart as well as hard and have a good business head.
- ♪ “You’re some tulip.” – Hmm, not really a flattering remark but a less harsh way of saying you’re a feckin’ eejit.



Just assume everything he says about you is a compliment. Even if it includes the word “feckin”, it’s likely his way of being endearing.

## How to get on well with your mother-in-law

The extended family might be working in the business, depending on its size. If that’s the case, family members of various generations live close together and many work long hours on the farm. The older couple usually like to stay living on the farm even if retired, so you are probably living within shouting distance of their house. It might feel a tad suffocating and claustrophobic at times.

Mothers-in-law tend to have a bad reputation, commonly cast in films and soap operas as being interfering, self-righteous, jealous and desperate to keep the power they hold within the farm structure and the community. Is that accurate? Is she really a villain or is she misunderstood?

## Different types of mothers-in-law (on a sliding scale)

- ❏ She is grateful someone married her son as she had given up on him. She might think you are mad to have married him so will welcome you with open arms.
- ❏ She is over the moon to have a daughter-in-law (particularly if she has all boys) and is excited about the prospect of grandchildren.
- ❏ She isn't happy with anything you do and lets everyone know.
- ❏ She wants to maintain the ownership (and keep the income) of the farm, and requires her son to work for a pittance. She expects you to work off farm and yet help out in your "spare time". She might even call you a gold-digger if she believes (or wants to believe) you are interested only in the value of the farm.
- ❏ She seems determined to set her children against each other and views any input from you as unwelcome interference.

Ironically, it seems the women who experienced a tough time from their mother-in-law make their daughters-in-law suffer. As the expression goes, it is a case of "poacher turned gamekeeper".

Some farmers' wives are great friends with their mother-in-law, even if they share the same house. This seems to work best if the younger woman stays working and her mother-in-law looks after the children and the house. Some women believe it works because they slotted into a "daughter" role rather than trying to challenge anything in the household. Others say they get on great with their mother-in-law but there is an inherent tension between them. The older woman feels "I made him, you owe me" while the daughter-in-law reacts with "He picked me, I'm his first priority now".

Realistically, for most women, the experience of sharing a kitchen let alone a house with another woman who is not a blood relative or a partner is going to have its moments. As Lisdoonvarna matchmaker Willie Daly says, "More than one woman in a kitchen is a recipe for disaster".<sup>27</sup> It's nobody's

fault: it's not possible to get on all the time. Everyone has their own habits which eventually drive the other person mad. It may be how the table is set or if one person leaves the toaster out on the worktop. Do you remember the days of sharing a kitchen with flatmates and being irritated because they didn't wash up or because someone ate something of yours? Those little things can start to grate on your nerves.

Ireland's Taoiseach during the 1930s, Eamonn de Valera, noticed the need for a separate house for the parents. There was widespread concern about farmers' sons inheriting farms so late in life and either remaining bachelors or being elderly when they eventually married. De Valera wanted the government to fund the building of cottages where the parents could live, while the younger couples lived in the farmhouses and were guaranteed to inherit the farm within ten years.

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... a cottier's house on every small farm, which would enable the eldest boy to get married without having to wait for years until the farm came into his possession through the death of his parents.

It was believed that as inheritance was delayed, the farmers were often too set in their ways to marry or gave in when mothers resisted the idea of a daughter-in-law. The dower house scheme didn't happen due to lack of funding and was proposed again in the 1950s. Again, it was a futile exercise.

Two generations sharing a house was common until the 1970s, but it is now rare in Ireland. If your in-laws are moving to another house, perhaps a new bungalow on the farm, and you are going to live in the farmhouse, set some boundaries from the outset. I recall hearing of a newlywed bride who woke to find her mother-in-law had popped into her bedroom. Talk about a step too far! Calling in for a cup of tea without knocking might be fine but it means it is hard to achieve privacy. The last thing you want is a "knowledgeable" mother-in-law dropping in

when the dinner is burning or one of your children is having a tantrum on the kitchen floor.

If you are living in the original farmhouse, you might find she resents changes to the decor. That orange and brown swirly “perfectly good carpet” chosen with love and care in the 1970s might have retro appeal but it isn’t necessarily the look you want. You have to choose between making changes little and often or getting them done in one fell swoop.

Farming parents often worry their daughter-in-law might divorce their son, resulting in half the farm being sold to finance the settlement. Apart from the sale affecting the future profitability of the business, there is the dread of losing land that has been in the family for generations. This fear can influence their decision to delay the transfer. In many ways, history is repeating itself, similar to Ireland of the 1950s when fathers held onto land until they died. Sons didn’t inherit until middle-aged or elderly. A delay in inheriting the farm can lead to problems since the young couple can’t get loans to improve or extend the farm as it isn’t in their name. The daughter-in-law might be left out of farming decisions and may feel powerless and frustrated. As a result, she doesn’t get involved which can be viewed as disinterest.

Remember that you have your own future to think of too. God forbid, but if anything happened to your husband and the farm is not in his name, you have very little security – maybe not even the house you live in. Being young, newly married and still financially independent is one thing, but it would be a very different situation if you have young children, don’t have an off-farm income and little involvement in the farm business.

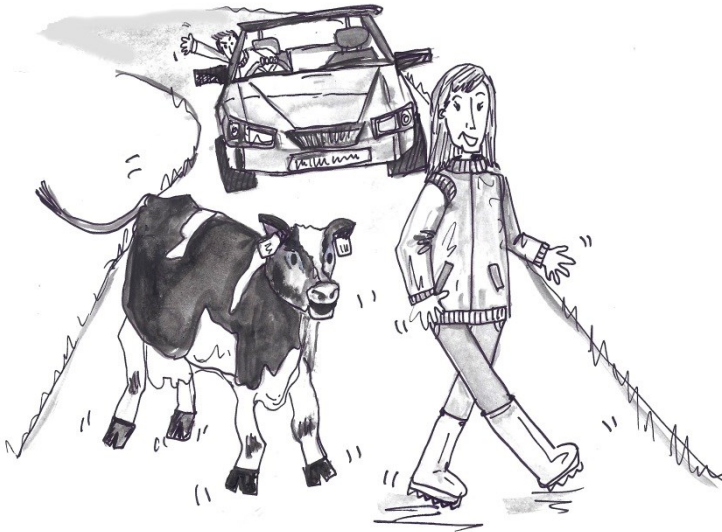
For all concerned, the future of the farm business and how it will be handled is an important topic that should be sorted with some conversation around the table, perhaps with the help of a facilitator.



Take a moment to try to understand your mother-in-law (if that’s not too big an ask!).

- ☛ Be grateful that mothers-in-law are less powerful now. They used to try to maintain their role of queen bee in the hive, with access to inside knowledge on everything in the farm and parish. Whereas they once stayed living in the family home, perched on their armchair thrones in the corner of the kitchen, they now tend to live in new bungalows, situated a short distance away from the farm.
- ☛ Consider your mother-in-law to be a useful ally rather than an adversary. Ask her for advice and tips and she might enjoy sharing her knowledge with you. She might even share some baking tips.
- ☛ Don't put your spouse in the middle if you can help it.
- ☛ When building a new home, ensure each house has some privacy. Just because you are in-laws, it doesn't mean that you have lots of things in common. Life would be great if you did but you're still going to need your own space.
- ☛ Set boundaries if necessary.
- ☛ Unless she actually tells you you're a gold-digger, she probably means well by her "helpful comments" – in her own way. As a result of being attached to the farm, she may be experiencing withdrawal symptoms and doesn't want to let go her ties to it. She might also want to keep her son holding onto her apron strings.
- ☛ Don't feel you have to be a carbon copy of your mother-in-law. Find your own place on the farm by taking on a role you enjoy.
- ☛ A caring mother-in-law makes a wonderful grandmother and they are usually delighted to look after the children after school or when you want a few hours off to go shopping. Work with her, appreciate her for what she does and reward her for her help.
- ☛ Remember you might be a mother-in-law some day!
- ☛ If she is difficult, remember that the more power you give her, the more formidable she becomes. Take inspiration from dairy cows. Watch them as they walk in to be milked, particularly if strutting along a road. They aren't bothered

by the waiting cars. The dog might nip at their heels and they'll quicken their step for a moment but not before kicking out. Don't let other people antagonise you. The cows saunter with confidence looking relaxed and graceful. They are strong and stoical. They know what they have to do and are happy to do it but they won't be pressurised if they can help it. Follow their lead, act confidently and you'll be treated with respect.





## How to plan for success and celebrate it when it comes

A farm is a living and breathing business. It can be both interesting and exciting to be involved in plans for it. Setting goals and planning strategies together are part of effective team-building but don't forget to reward yourselves with some team-bonding afterwards. Discussing what bulls to use on cows is much more interesting when you know exactly how you want to improve the herd. Going shopping for a new ram might not match shoe-shopping, but it definitely raises the game if you're hoping for award-winning sheep in the future. Being a perfect farm wife doesn't just involve knowing the names of the fields; it is also about planning goals and realising the dreams of the farm business and, yes, it is often the wife who gives the farmer the confidence to go for it.

What are the best days in farming? When the harvest is in and it's a good crop. When he returns from the mart with an empty trailer happy with the price for the stock. When the sun is shining, the grass is growing and the cows are chewing their cud contentedly. When your prize heifer wins a ribbon at an agricultural show. When you stand in one of your fields and look at the view, feeling you're on top of the world.



Farming tends to be rush, rush, rush and once one task is completed, it is onto the next project. Farmers don't often stop to mark the wins. If there is something to celebrate, big or small, go out for a meal or bake a special cake. It helps the children to see that farming isn't all about hard work too. Even a good meal with a nice bottle of wine helps you to remember the good times and strive for more success.

## How to avoid a divorce

Divorce in farm families can have deeper consequences than most other situations because of the familial tie to the land. It doesn't always follow that the non-farming spouse gets half the farm, but part of it might have to be sold to finance the settlement. This can cause huge upset and consternation and is one of the reasons why girlfriends are sometimes treated with so much suspicion (and described as gold-diggers) by prospective in-laws.

It's very easy to romanticise marriage and see living on a farm as the "good life", the rural idyll where the sun is always shining and you work as a team with never a cross word between you. Comparing it to a 40-hour working week doesn't help either as you'll constantly be annoyed when he doesn't arrive in at a decent time in the evenings. If you like being organised, it takes time to acclimatise to the fact it's difficult to plan the simplest things, like having a family day off together. At least when you don't get to take too many days off, you appreciate them all the more!



If you both hate doing a particular job and it is causing arguments, hire someone to do it. If paperwork is a problem, take on a bookkeeper and just throw everything into a shoebox. It makes it much easier than arguing about mislaid paperwork. Delegating and outsourcing are a lot cheaper than a divorce.

Use sorting the livestock as a means to get frustration out of your system. You know you both forget about the angst afterwards and put it all down to his poor communication skills. Don't use it as an excuse to get started and bring up every other reason he drives you mad.

Start the way you mean to go on. If seeing his dirty clothes on the floor fills you with annoyance in the early days of marriage, you are going to be fit to explode by the time you've had two children. Get him to drop them into "his" laundry

basket from day one. If he asks “What’s for dinner?” minutes after you’ve both finished a farm task, pass him the potato peeler. It’s up to you if you want to use a stabbing motion when handing it over.

Ensure there’s equality with finance. If you plan to give up off-farm work to care for the children and you’re going to be working on the farm, have equal access to the cheque book.

Communication is key, sharing a dream and working towards it, understanding disappointment when things don’t work out, having a laugh, taking time out. And remember what I said about those compliments? Keep an eye out for them! It’s good to feel appreciated.

## How to find the silver lining

Some people see farmers as pessimistic, that they are always complaining, never pleased when things go right or if the weather is good. There are so many things to deal with between Mother Nature, market prices of outputs and inputs, grass growth, crop yield, illness and death. Some believe bad events happen in threes so if they’ve had bad luck twice, they are almost waiting for the next misfortune. But are they as miserable as they seem?

Farmers would never stay in the business if they were negative all the time. If things are going well, they almost feel too superstitious to admit to good fortune, believing the next thing will go wrong if they tempt fate, using expressions such as “not bad” rather than “good”, or “ticking along” instead of “flying it”. Indeed, if a farmer, when asked “How are things?” replies with a really positive response such as “Great” or “Fantastic” he will be viewed with suspicion of telling lies.

If negative things do happen, if they are having a tough year, they try to see the silver lining. If an animal has died, farmers tend to say “as long as it’s all in the yard”, or “as long as

it's not in the house", meaning if no one in the family is ill, it will all be okay. And if it is a poor year financially, there will be less money going to the Revenue!

If farmers weren't so optimistic, they might be shrewder businesspeople. Indeed, less optimism might result in there being no fat cattle or sheep in the country some years. If farmers get a poor price for their cattle in the factory, they still go back to the mart to buy young stock in the expectation that prices will be better the following year. They enjoy what they do and are always hopeful for better prices.

Although you (unlike some of the cows) are too realistic to think that the grass might be greener on the other side, you always have a "glass half full" attitude. Otherwise, you'll be sobbing all the way to the bank on a regular basis.



There will be days when it is hard to see the positives. As a farm wife, if things are getting to him, it's your role to point them out if he can't see them. Even things like comparing a long commute stuck in traffic to his stroll across the fields are worth seeing as advantageous. If that only serves to irritate, then you both need some TLC: Tea, Love and Chocolate.

## How to conceal your mood

Family farming means you are working with your nearest and dearest but that doesn't mean they won't drive you mad at times. Even a perfect farm wife is allowed to be slightly grumpy and hormonal occasionally. However, you can disguise it by using words opposite to what you mean. The trick is using an appropriate tone of voice so others don't suspect your sarcasm.

- ☕ “Fine.” – Used when you’re feeling grumpy and your husband has just asked how you are. This signals that he should not say “You’re not fine, what’s wrong?”, or “What’s up with you then?”, which only serve to infuriate you more.
- ☕ “That’s nice.” – Sod off with your boasting and bragging about your first prize in the show.
- ☕ “You’re welcome.” – If through gritted teeth, this means someone has one up on you and you’re not going to let them know.
- ☕ “Oh, how lovely!” – Please don’t tell me about your holiday to the Caribbean as I haven’t even got to Kerry for the last five years.
- ☕ “Do call again, anytime!” – Oh, please don’t, and if I see you coming, I’ll be heading out to bring in the cows.
- ☕ “Whatever.” – I really don’t care what you do, I’m busy and don’t have time for this bellyaching about something inconsequential.

## How to have a social life

Sometimes it can feel that the farm is work, work, work and even those tractor dates can get a bit tedious after a while, especially if the conversation revolves around crops or the engine size of the new tractor. Sometimes, the only time you have a “best hair day”, there’s only the livestock to appreciate it as your partner is too preoccupied to notice.

It is possible to get out there and have a social life. If his idea of socialising includes attending farm meetings where they moan about beef prices; going to a vintage tractor club, which means you are a passenger when he’s tootling along on his vintage runs, or taking part in stock judging when they compare udders amongst other things, you might decide to take up some hobbies of your own.

Living on a farm means it can be a downward slippery slope to becoming a hermit. If you want to get to know people in the area, join a book club, an ICA/WI group or the local sports club. Some book clubs chat about the book for five minutes and then move to more important matters like news and gossip; others stick rigidly to the book, so know what you want before you join up!

In the past, some farm women had a limited social life. The only outing for many was their monthly ICA meeting. Men and women didn't even go to the pub together: women weren't allowed into pubs until the late 1960s and were even fined if they were brave enough to enter the doors. Eventually "snugs" were built – a little room off the main bar, where women could sit and chat within the confined space. Before that, wives finished their weekly shopping and waited in the car or trap until their husbands finished drinking in the pub.

My paternal grandmother rarely went to town shopping. Her husband drove in weekly, left the shopping list in the grocery store and called to see his brother for a while, returning to collect the groceries later. It sounds like supermarket shopping was much more civilised then! She didn't join the ICA but attended the local Mothers' Union meeting once a month. I had presumed that surely the weekly church service would provide her with a couple of hours out but no, cooking the dinner for her large family meant she stayed at home as the range had to be kept hot. However, they received lots of visitors. Her husband's brother came every weekend, and relatives and neighbours called up every Sunday afternoon. She used to make eight apple tarts every Saturday and not a crumb would be left on the Sunday evening.

Two Co. Clare women recalled how their parents either hosted or visited a ceili in a neighbour's house almost every night of the week. Their house was filled with music and dancing every Wednesday evening and they took it in their turn to visit others. It sounds like a quiet night in was very rare indeed.

Years ago, neighbours visited each other regularly too. Once the work was done, they'd call to each other to tell stories and play cards, often playing poker for matches. The lane running at the back of our farm is now quiet as the few houses dotted along it are empty and derelict but it once served as a shortcut from the school and church to a townland. Schoolchildren and Mass-goers trooped along it as did people visiting neighbours at night, using the light of the moon to see their way.

If you're now thinking the social life half a century ago sounded better than yours, you need to start getting out there.



When going out, check the contents of your handbag before you open it in front of other people. Most women have handbags containing a medley of accessories. These probably include a packet of tissues, make-up, a small mirror, a hairbrush, business cards, their mobile phone and a purse. Your handbag might be more like an industrial satchel or toolbag. Add to those items a pair of pliers, a few blue cards (animal passports), a cheque book with dubious-looking stains, invoices to be paid, scraps of paper with notes of what the farmer wants from town, a few nuts and bolts, paracetamol and maybe a thermometer for animals (not to be confused and used on humans!).

## FARM WIFE QUIZ (1)

1. You're planning a holiday. Do you:
  - (a) Arrange for cover for the farm and book a "farm tour" holiday abroad for the two of you
  - (b) Arrange a week's holiday for the slackest time of the year
  - (c) Decide to head off to the sun with a few friends?
2. It's getting close to silage time and he's wondering when to tell the contractors to cut the grass. Do you:
  - (a) Check out every possible weather forecast and bring the samples of grass to be tested for nitrogen, doing a grocery shop on the way
  - (b) Prepare for the pre-silage tension by buying lots of chocolate as you know his PST will last until all silage is in the pit and covered
  - (c) Think about visiting the seaside for a couple of days with the children?



3. The farmer knocks on the kitchen window, asks if you are busy and says he wants some help for five minutes. Do you:
  - (a) Sigh inwardly, turn down the oven so the dinner doesn't burn and pull on your wellies and coat knowing you will be outside for at least an hour
  - (b) Say "no problem" and run out in your crocs, expecting it to take five minutes
  - (c) Glower at him and say you're busy cooking dinner?
4. His extended family are doing "Secret Santa" this year and you've drawn your mother-in-law's name out of the hat. Do you buy her:
  - (a) Her favourite perfume because you know she will love it
  - (b) An airplane ticket to go and see relatives abroad for a few weeks
  - (c) A scarf, since someone told you they weren't the safest clothing for farms?
5. Your farmer falls asleep in an armchair when visiting your relatives. Do you:
  - (a) Put a cushion under his head so he won't wake up with a sore neck, wishing you could join him
  - (b) Cringe and hope he doesn't snore too loudly, saying you'll wake him in fifteen minutes
  - (c) Kick his foot to wake him and hope nobody notices?
6. You go into labour with your second child. Do you:
  - (a) Decide to finish spreading the fertiliser first just in case you're not home again for a few days
  - (b) Pack your bag for the hospital while timing contractions, checking that you've left him with written instructions for defrosting all the meals you've left in the freezer
  - (c) Ring the hospital to tell them you're leaving immediately while your husband carries your huge suitcase to the car? If having a baby means you can get meals in bed for a week, you're going to enjoy every minute.

7. It's your wedding anniversary and he suggests you accompany him to sell lambs, stopping for a quick pub lunch on the way home. Do you:
  - (a) Say no problem, you were going to go with him anyway. Lunch out and his undivided attention for an hour, what a wonderful way to spend your anniversary
  - (b) Agree but get him to promise to a meal out on Saturday night
  - (c) Refuse. How dare he think he can palm you off with a quick lunch in a pub?
8. He agrees to a special night out. Do you:
  - (a) Prepare for something to go wrong and have a backup plan
  - (b) Nag him to make sure nothing goes wrong
  - (c) Go shopping for new clothes and go and get your hair done?

### **How did you do?**

Mostly A's – you're a born farmer / farmer's wife and embrace everything about the farming lifestyle.

Mostly B's – you're well on the way to becoming a perfect farm wife. Keep it up.

Mostly C's – ahem, maybe try a little harder with the next section.

# CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
<b>Part One .....</b>	<b>3</b>
I Now Pronounce You A Farm Wife.....	5
Love and marriage.....	6
A family affair .....	13
The Irish Mammy ("Imagine, she's feeding him rice for dinner!") ...	14
Is it a bit o' road frontage you're after?.....	15
Isolation or blissful solitude.....	16
The joy of life .....	17
Sexy farmers?.....	18
Ode to a farmer .....	20
A hard shell with a soft centre.....	21
Romance on the farm .....	22
Is Marrying a Farmer Different?.....	23
His & hers .....	24
Bob the Builder .....	27
"Does my bum look big in this?" .....	28
Hell's Kitchen.....	29
Blowing a fuse.....	30
We're all going on a ... holiday day out.....	30
Desperate Farmwives .....	32
Air kisses or the wink .....	32
Ah, go on, you'll have a cup, sure, the kettle is on.....	33
The farm is in his blood.....	34
What Is A Farm Wife? What Does She Do? .....	35
What is a farmer's wife? .....	37
What is a <i>perfect</i> farm wife? .....	38
<b>Part Two.....</b>	<b>45</b>
Farming Relationships.....	46
How To "Manage" Your Farmer .....	47
How to go on regular dates with your farmer .....	47
How to manage a sleepy husband when visiting friends .....	48

How to ensure the perfect gift from your other half .....	51
How to ensure your other half can look after himself.....	52
How to keep him well groomed .....	53
Domestic Bliss .....	55
How to emphasise your domestic skills .....	55
How to wear an apron and wellies with flair.....	57
How To Rear Your Farm Children.....	59
How to manage your pregnancy .....	59
How to bring up children on the farm.....	61
How to create wonderful memories .....	63
How to tell farm children about sex .....	66
How to encourage children to farm.....	67
How to share childcare.....	70
Health and Safety .....	71
How to get a farmer to take a holiday.....	72
How to cope with stress .....	74
How to keep your family safe.....	76
How to stay healthy .....	79
How To Stay Married .....	80
How to recognise a compliment .....	80
How to get on well with your mother-in-law .....	81
How to plan for success and celebrate it when it comes .....	87
How to avoid a divorce.....	88
How to find the silver lining .....	89
How to conceal your mood.....	90
How to have a social life.....	91
Farm Wife Quiz (1) .....	94
<b>Part Three .....</b>	<b>97</b>
The Farm.....	98
Working On The Farm .....	99
How to be an efficient midwife .....	99
How to feed lambs, kids and calves .....	100
How to teach a calf to drink from a bucket .....	101
How to teach a calf to drink from a teat .....	102
How to catch a calf .....	103
How to herd livestock.....	105
How to tell when an animal is fertile.....	106
How to bring cows in to be milked .....	107
How to milk cows .....	108
How to keep hens .....	110
How to hug a cow .....	111
How to care for goats.....	112
How to move livestock along the road .....	114
How to sort a batch of animals into two groups.....	115
How to deal with death on the farm .....	117
Adding To Your Technical Know-How.....	119
How to measure grass .....	119

How to drive a tractor and reverse a trailer .....	120
How to interpret sign language.....	121
What does he really mean? .....	123
How to become a weather girl.....	124
Utilising Your Existing Skills .....	127
Your version of agrifashion .....	127
How to run fast in wellies.....	129
How to use your hairdressing skills.....	129
How to keep your hands soft.....	130
How to find the right field .....	131
How to be prepared for all events .....	132
How to enjoy living on the farm.....	133
Farm Wife Quiz (2).....	135
<b>Part Four.....</b>	<b>139</b>
The Farm Household.....	140
How Clean Is Your House? .....	141
How to keep the farmhouse clean.....	142
How to use traditional cleaning materials .....	144
How to use bicarbonate of soda .....	147
How to clean with lemons .....	147
How to clean with vinegar.....	148
How to get rid of stains .....	149
How to dry clothes using a clothes line .....	150
How to catch a mouse.....	152
How to catch a bird or a bat .....	153
How to be environmentally friendly.....	154
How to train a farmer to do housework.....	157
Domestic Goddess.....	158
How to win a (hypothetical) Housewife of the Year prize .....	159
How to win awards at agricultural shows.....	160
Coffee cake .....	161
The religion of baking.....	162
How to be self-sufficient.....	163
How to eat your home-produced meat.....	164
How to prepare a chicken for the table.....	165
How to set a table .....	166
How to cook a dinner fit for a king farmer .....	168
Shepherd's (lamb) or cottage (beef) pie.....	168
Roast dinner.....	169
Casseroles.....	170
Omelette.....	170
Bacon and cabbage .....	171
Chicken pie.....	171
A good fry-up .....	172
Desserts.....	173
Rice pudding.....	173
Rhubarb tart .....	174

Fruit crumbles .....	174
Steamed pudding.....	175
Teas .....	176
More recipes .....	178
Kate's brown bread.....	178
Scones / Spot o' dick.....	179
Spot o' dick.....	180
Raspberry jam.....	180
Barmbrack .....	181
One-egg cake.....	183
Chocolate Swiss roll.....	184
How to feed contractors .....	185
How to create a meal from almost nothing .....	187
How to create your signature dish.....	187
Biscuit cake .....	188
How to pack a picnic for the field .....	190
How to make a perfect cup of tea (or mug of tay) .....	191
Farm Wife Quiz (3).....	193
<b>Part Five.....</b>	<b>197</b>
Community Spirit .....	198
How to get to know your neighbours.....	199
How to get involved in local community events.....	201
How to help at funerals.....	202
How to talk about the weather - at length.....	203
How to get the farmer to attend weddings and other functions.....	204
Farm Wife Quiz (4).....	206
<b>Part Six.....</b>	<b>209</b>
Managing Money And Starting A Farm Business .....	210
How to manage the paperwork.....	212
How to organise your filing system .....	214
How to keep control of cash flow .....	215
How to stay on good terms with the bank manager.....	216
How to forge your husband's signature (allegedly) .....	218
How to bring in additional income .....	219
Farm business ideas .....	221
Adding value to produce .....	221
Tourism.....	222
Crafts .....	224
Weddings .....	224
Other ideas.....	225
Tips for setting up a business.....	226
Farm Wife Quiz (5).....	227
Conclusion .....	229
Follow me on social media.....	231
Further reading .....	232
Notes .....	234

## Reviews

Advance review for *How To Be A Perfect Farm Wife*

“As an investment banker turned farmer’s wife, this is funny, educational, really interesting and exactly what I need. A joy to read.” *Aideen Fleming*

Reviews for *Would You Marry A Farmer?*

“Lorna’s observations on the daily life of the farmer’s wife had me laughing out loud in recognition ... written with great warmth and affection.” *Horse and Countryside*

“I picked up the book expecting something in the nature of a humorous gift-book: a light-hearted distraction with a grounding of good sense; but, I found a much richer story.” Rich Rennicks, *A Trip to Ireland* (blog)

“I highly recommend this book as a must-read guide, for anyone interested in rural Irish life, both past and present.” Mairead Geary, *Irish American Mom* (blog)

“She writes with authority and from experience and no doubt her sense of humour, much in evidence throughout the book, has enabled her to cope with the ups and downs of marrying a farmer.” Teagasc, *Today’s Farm Magazine*