

Farming Tradition Combines Fruit & Milk

by

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Combing fruit and milk has been a farming tradition on Hedgebrook Farm, Robert Hockman's orchard and dairy operation near Winchester, Virginia. Now his daughters, Kitty Nicholas and Robin Eddy, have taken the idea even further and added a third operation to the family farm—yogurt.

Although both grew up on the farm and Nicholas had been managing the dairy for several years, making yogurt was a totally new and different enterprise for the sisters. "One reason it appealed to us was because it was an out-growth of our existing dairy facility," Nicholas explains. "We also felt we could do well in marketing and that it was going to be a good money making enterprise."

Nearly four years and over \$100,000.00 later, they still feel that way. Their product, Hedgebrook Farm Yogurt, is an all natural swiss-style yogurt with honey sweetened fruit stirred in. While the fruit must be ordered from a specialty company, the jersey milk is from the farm herd and the sisters even use a local honey. What's more, the recipe is all their own.

Production has come a long way since Eddy stirred up the first trial batches in her kitchen. Today, 45 Jerseys with a rolling herd average of 13,000 pounds and 4.7% butterfat provide the milk to make 500 gallons of yogurt a week. The cultured product is 96% whole milk with milk solids, stabilizer and protein added. No thickeners are necessary since Jersey milk is rich enough to do the job alone.

You don't learn that kind of production on the back of a kitchen stove, Eddy admits. Instead, they visited yogurt operations like the Colombo plant in Hagerstown, Md.

They also hired professionals to develop a formula and culture for their yogurt...as well as the equipment and procedure to make a marketable product.

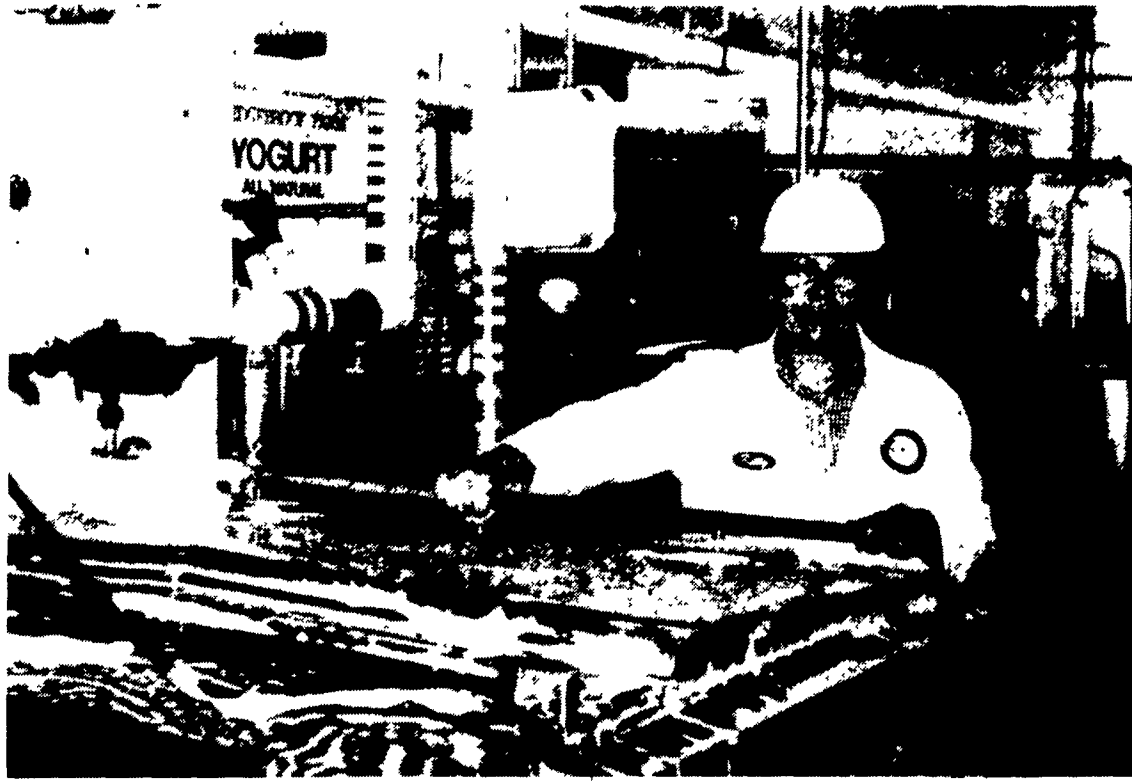
The set-up is relatively simple. "The cows are milked and the milk comes directly from the udder into our 500 gallon bulk tank," Eddy explains. "There it's cooled to 38°F as soon as it gets there—almost instantly," she adds. "Our pasteurizer holds 250-280 gallons so we withdraw the amount of milk we want out of the bulk tank and into the pasteurizer which is double jacked and three zoned."

"After we run as much milk into the pasteurizer as we want, we add what we need to add and then heat up the milk and its contents to 185°F with a 30 h.p. industrial boiler. We have three thermometers we use and when it reaches this temperature, we hold it for half an hour. Then we cool it down to 110°F, stop cooling and add the live, active culture."

Their formula is somewhat different than most, including not only lactobacillus bulgarius and streptococcus thermophilus bacteria but also acidophilus. "Acidophilus is the most important one and that's good for your digestive system," Eddy reports. After the culture is added, the mixture is agitated for 15-20 minutes and then rests for 10-12 hours to incubate.

Once the yogurt reaches a pH of 4.5, Eddy breaks the acidity and cools it down to 70°F. It then moves into the 100 gallon blending tank where Eddy adds the fruit and honey, making sure each batch of Hedgebrook Yogurt tastes the same. It's quality control with a personal touch.

"That's our secret formula," she smiles. "We have strawberry, raspberry, blueberry, cherry, peach and vanilla; and we do plain also," the younger sister lists, ranking them in order of popularity. "But the plain is



Kitty Nicholas scrubs a milk tank in the on-the-farm yogurt operation.

getting more popular for cooking. People use it instead of mayonhaise and sour cream, or in their baking," she elaborates.

When the fruited yogurt is ready, it moves into an Anderson filler which can fill 40 four or eight ounce cups a minute. These are mechanically dated and hand packed into cardboard trays which hold twelve cups. Once wrapped, they'll be stored in a cooler until delivered locally or picked up by a distributor to fill an order.

Marketing is the other half of the yogurt business. Both Eddy and Nicholas have strong backgrounds in marketing, but understand the idea is not for all farm operations. "It's definitely not something the majority of people have any knowledge of—nor do they want it," Nicholas admits. "There's a better profit margin to be made on a market ready product, but only if you can get your name out there and get people to buy your product. That's the most difficult thing."

Keeping this in mind, the sisters also hired a market research firm to find out (1) what consumers wanted to buy and (2) what would encourage them to buy Hedgebrook Farm Yogurt specifically. The firm found there was a demand for a high-quality, all natural yogurt, especially in a four ounce snack size that would be suitable for small children.

This led Nicholas and Eddy to choose four and eight ounce containers for their product. The jersey (cow) brown plastic cups have a simple sketch of the "gentle jersey" as a logo and include the words "Made in the Shenandoah Valley," something most people respond favorably, Nicholas explains. A Circle around the logo then indicates flavor and provides a touch of color.

They still had to sell their product though, and began knocking on doors. Winchester is a small city about 90 miles west of Washington D.C. and local customers soon included the Frederick County and Winchestr school systems, the Winchester Medical Center, independent grocery stores and an area distributor. The sisters have since picked up other distributors which sell their yogurt to, among others, a chain of D.C. grocery stores called Magruders, and now A&P.

"One problem we have is getting stores to buy our product and then, after they buy it, getting the consumer to buy it...because they don't know who Hedgebrook Farm is," Nicholas explains. "Whenever we do demos in stores, we get people to taste the product and then buy it—lots of it. And then they're going to come back and buy it again. But you have to spend a lot of money to get people to buy your product unless you want to



The proof is in the eating Hedgebrook Farm yogurt packaged in four ounce containers appeals to children.

wait maybe eight to ten years down the road for your markets."

This thinking was paid off. Within a year of beginning commercial production, Hedgebrook Farm Yogurt can be found from Miami to Boston and as far west as Ohio. An advertisig campaign is also planned for the Maryland/Virginia/D.C. market beginning the first week in June. This should introduce more people to the farm fresh yogurt available in their dairy case and make the investment worthwhile, Nicholas says.

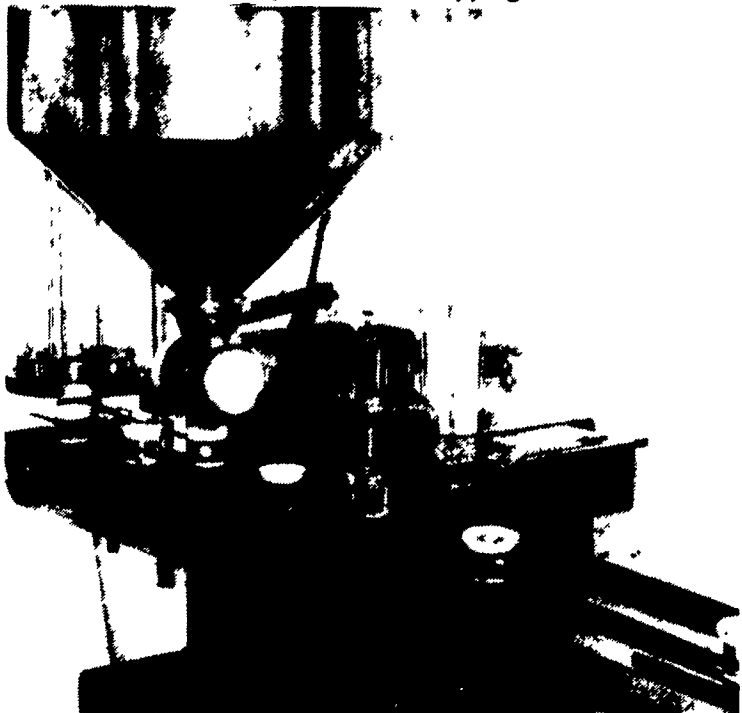
All of this is a far cry from marketing milk through a co-op, she points out. "There's no comparison, it's just like night and day. There's no selling involved with producing fluid milk. Our only responsibilities are producing the best quality we can and getting the most out of our cows we can per head for the least amount of money. Now when you get into the yogurt business, you have to do all that plus market your product."

Making yogurt isn't going to change things on Hedgebrook Farm except make them all a little busier, Nicholas promises. Both she and Eddy are committed to the family farm, and Nicholas is very proud to be a dairy farmer. In the past five years, she's brought the rolling herd average of her father's purebred and grade holsteins up to 21,000 pounds. This includes more than a 2,000 pound jump in 1985 which landed them Virginia's most improved dairy herd award this winter.

Hedgebrook Farm Yogurt, the sisters say, is their joint contribution to the farm their grandparents started in 1907. Nicholas takes care of the dairy cows and all the equipment while Eddy is in charge of making the yogurt. Both sisters then share the marketing and other responsibilities. "It really doesn't count until you have your own money and your own blood and sweat and tears invested in it," Nicholas says.



Alice Greer operates the wrapping machine.



A special filling machine needed to be developed to accommodate four ounce cups.



Robin Eddy shows finished product at Hedgebrook Farm.