

'Moo've' On

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While the milking parlor has its advantages, the Lawrences remain loyal to tie stalls. Although the freestalls are more labor efficient, the Lawrences believe tie stalls allows more individual attention to cows. It was also easier to have their children around the cows in the tie stall barn than the freestall.

A typical day begins at 3 a.m. and ends at 7 p.m. for Tom. It takes about three hours to milk the 170 cows. Although two full-time and one seasonal worker works on the farm, Tom finds it difficult to take time off.

"I can't sit at home if someone else is doing the work," he said.

Although herd averages have risen significantly under the Lawrences management, the couple shun compliments on their abilities. They know how quickly things can go wrong even with the best laid plans and oversight.

Recently one of the best Guernseys slipped in the parlor and needed to be put down.

"We don't want to pat ourselves on the back," Tom said. "We give the nutritionist lots of credit."

Because the couple were independent farmers, they weren't sure if they could work for someone else. "But this has worked out well. We talk things over with the owners Walter and Gabrielle Buck, but they allow us to make a lot of decisions," Tom said.

"Honesty is the best policy when working for someone else," Jennifer advised. "Tell everything."

The couple were hired as a package deal.

Jennifer does the A.I. work, cares for the calves, and is the cow record bookkeeper for the farm. While Jennifer does the breeding, it's Tom who enjoys researching genetics. He puts together a mating list that the owners review and make selections or changes. They also use Triple A Mating in which the cows and bulls are analyzed and assigned numbers.

When the Lawrences came they admittedly knew little about Guernseys, but they did know a lot about cows and what they didn't know about Guernseys, they soon learned.

They learned that calf heifers do better at bunk feeders than at computer feeders. That it's good to run Guernseys through a foot bath to prevent foot problems.

"Guernseys handle heat stress well but not other stresses," Tom said.

Jennifer said, "We try to pay attention to the smallest detail. When you're busy, you can go crazy, but it's a must for things to go smoothly," Jennifer said.

One of the places that the Lawrences pay close attention to milking procedures. They clip udders. Their goal is to keep somatic cell counts below 150, which was much easier to do when they had tiestalls.

For their Jersey herd, the Lawrences were recently awarded for having the lowest somatic cell count in the county.

When the couple first came to Mt. Ararat, the calves were kept in one of the beautiful old stone barns on the property. Unfortunately, the calves would lay against the stone walls, which often caused the calves to develop pneumonia.

The Lawrences are staunch believers in raising cattle outdoors as much as possible. For this reason, a super hutch with four bays was erected. Vaccinations and dehorning can be done with ease.

"It's a great place to wean calves," Jennifer said of the hutches. The calves are put into hutches at birth for two to three months and then to the super hutches for up to six months.

In the milking barn, curtains are on all four sides to allow maximum air flow. While the calves are bedded with straw, the cows are bedded with sand.

About 15 yards of fresh sand is delivered every three weeks.

"The cows like the sand better than the mattresses," Tom said.

Under their management, the farm has been made a lot more efficient. A new manure storage system has been completed recently.

"Now we can spread it under optimum conditions instead of spending two hours on it everyday like we used to do," said Tom, who estimates that 25 percent is saved in manure costs.

Numerous lots are scattered around the grounds for dry cows. A mixer wagon is used to feed the cattle at the lots.

One of the barns on the property is used to prepare the show cows and to house any that seem ill. While the Lawrences regret that many of the beautiful stone barns, which are structurally sound, and silos on the property are empty,

they know that by using the old facilities, cow comfort and health are jeopardized.

"Cow comfort and producing a quality product are the name of the game," Tom said.

He enjoys working with both cows and crops. "You must do a good job at everything to produce a good herd," he said.

"Recently we've had two homebred cows go Excellent. It's a real big thrill," Jennifer said as she recalled how they started with inexpensive cows and continued to upgrade breeding because they couldn't afford to buy the best in the beginning.

"It's nice to have any cow go Excellent, but it's extra special when you homebred it yourself," Jennifer said.

The first homebred Excellent cow scored 92 points at 3 years and 2 months. It milks 27,390 pounds, 4.76 fat, 1,305 pounds fat, and 3.61 protein.

In the future, the couple hope to sell bulls to both Holstein and Guernsey associations.

The couple see their move as a great opportunity.

"The breed associations are much stronger here — some of the best in the country," Tom said.

They are delighted with the good rapport established through the Maryland Virginia Milk Cooperative. After they were named young cooperative runners-up, they attended the NICE conference in St. Louis. They also received a herd management award from the Jersey breed.

Awards are nothing new to the Lawrences. They were named the outstanding young farmers two years in a row for the county and one year for the state of Connecticut.

The Lawrences live on the house on the property that was built by the former owner who called it a "piece of paradise." The house sits on a wooded cliff overlooking both the river and the bay.

"The deer come up to the house windows," Jennifer said of the wildlife.

While Jennifer spends many hours working on the farm, she drops the children off at a babysitter's home that is on the grounds.

"I always wanted my children with me, but they like it with the babysitter and that way I don't need to worry that they might get hurt by the machinery or animals,"



Jennifer, Carolyn, 6; Virginia, 3; and Thomas, 20 months, stand in their yard, which sets high on the cliffs above the Chesapeake Bay and the Susquehanna River shown in the background.

Jennifer said.

Jennifer is delighted at the opportunities to host open houses on the farm. In June, they hosted the National Guernsey Association Tour and two weeks ago about 1,000 people came to the county farm tour organized by the Cooperative Extension.

Signs on all the equipment enabled visitors to see what each piece cost. Visitors saw the precautions taken in preparing cows for milking.

Jennifer said, "Although we don't get any monetary gain from it, the open houses are a great opportunity to show the public how farmers are really quality minded."

The biggest drawback for moving from his home state is that "I don't get to work with my father," Tom said. "We worked really well together and I didn't realize how much I would miss him until I came here. I envy other guys who can work with their fathers."

While he doesn't have a dad nearby, Tom often refers to a valuable asset that he does have.

He recalled that on his first day of class at college, the professor stressed that if student wanted to farm, he or she should make sure to get a spouse who understands and

is willing to accept farming.

"I've been really lucky," he said. "My wife loves farming as much as I do."

While Mt. Ararat Farm has a unique history, the Lawrences don't bask in the past glory of the farm. They want to add to that history by building new records.

"Making more milk isn't always the answer," Tom said. "It's the bottom line that determines the best way to go."

"For us, cow comfort and producing a quality product are the name of the game," he said.

The couple are optimistic that the future for the dairy industry and for them will continue to build a lasting legacy for future generations.

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