

Siblings Hone Niches To Remain On Family Farm

LOU ANN GOOD
Food And Family
Features Editor

NEWBURG (Cumberland Co.) — While many of their peers are leaving family farms because they cannot earn enough income from it, Melanie Dietrich Cochran and Ian Dietrich are 20-something siblings who have systematically carved out a niche that is both financially and emotionally rewarding.

Through diligent research and plain hard work, they have created value-added businesses that enable them to continue farming and make a viable profit.

Melanie makes cheese from the milk produced by her parents' Jersey herd. With the whey that is drained during the cheesemaking process, her brother Ian feeds pigs on pasture and markets the frozen pork by cut. Any bull calves born to the dairy herd are also raised on pasture and milk, and sold as pastured veal.

They work hard, but the siblings are amazed that the part they expected to be the most difficult is actually the easiest.

"Everyone said marketing is the hardest part. But we have done very little. Instead we have markets calling us."

Working on the family farm was always a part of the siblings' dreams.

Melanie said that she literally grew up in the barn. The year she was born her parents, Bill and Susan Dietrich, purchased their present 100-acre farm in Newburg, Cumberland County in 1978. They moved their 20-head Jersey herd from Bucks County. Over the years they added several other breeds but eventually settled on the Jersey breed, which they prefer for their sweet temperament, and increased the herd size to 65 milking cows.

In 1985, her parents build a large attached milk house to enable them to make yogurt to sell.

But her parents eventually had four children and operating a full-time dairy in addition to a yogurt business was too time consuming. They sold the yogurt brand name, recipe, and equipment to concentrate on the dairy end of farming.

In 1989, the family heard about conventional grazing. The farm's soil is "very droughty" Melanie said, making it difficult to raise corn silage. Of course, when Melanie was growing up, she was too young to understand the differences in soils types, but her parents' experiences eking out a living from the soil later played a role in the eventual direction of the farm.

Melanie grew up always wanting to be around cows. Ian preferred the tractor work.

Melanie earned a degree in dairy science at Virginia Tech.

"I was well prepared to manage a 1,000 cow dairy in California, but I didn't want that," she said.

Instead, in 1997 Melanie and her husband Mark Cochran moved back to the family farm. Mark, from non-farming background, is a graphic designer who works in Harrisburg. He enjoys country life but did not desire to make a career in farming. Melanie's goal was to milk cows. "I love them," she said.

When the couple first returned to the family farm, Melanie managed a fast food franchise and milked cows in the evening. But she knew the dairy end could not support two families. She searched for a way to make her dream to continue the dairy end come true.

The idea for a cheesemaking venture was sparked at a Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) conference she attended in 1997. The conference focused on value-added produce addressed toward the fruit and vegetable growers.

"We didn't grow produce. We had a dairy farm, so I started



Melanie Dietrich Cochran stands in front of the recent 10 acres she and her husband attained. At one time, this parcel had been part of the family farm before the Dietrich family purchased it. It was their dream to add it to the present farm.

thinking how to add value to milk," Melanie said of the idea for cheese making.

She spoke to others involved in cheesemaking and in May 2000 took a four-day course at Cal Poly Tech Campus. Because her husband couldn't take off from his job over that time, her brother Ian, a college freshman, chose to accompany her.

The course sparked the entrepreneur gene within them. Ian quit college to assist Melanie in setting up a cheese dairy. The siblings are both ingenious and managed to do a lot of improvising to save money from buying needed equipment. For example, Ian converted an ice bank bulk tank to pump hot water inside a core. The milk from cows was immediately stored in the bulk tank, where it was then cooked and stirred until cheese curds form. It is then packed into cheese boxes and stored in walk-in coolers for curing. The siblings cleaned and painted the large area that had once served as the yogurt kitchen and refurbished a walk-in freezer.

But the siblings plan was not only to begin a cheese making business. In order to make the farm more sustainable, Ian chose to raise pigs to feed the whey from the cheesemaking process. Pork is marketed frozen by the cut under the label "Luscious Meadows." In addition, bull calves are raised on pasture and milk and sold as pastured veal.

Melanie said, "My job is to value add milk. Ian's is to value add milk waste by feeding the whey to pigs and to bull calves sold for pastured veal."

The time is ripe for the siblings' venture. They find customers want to purchase dairy products from farms that are considered more humane and environmentally friendly through grazing practices. In addition there have been no herbicides, pesticides, or chem-

ical fertilizers used on the farm for 15 years.

"We do not use BST on our cows, and we do not dock their tails, practices that are used on many large commercial dairy farms," Melanie said.

She appeals to the personal side of customers by taking photos of the cows and displaying the photos at their market stands and by publishing a seasonal newsletter. The "Keswick Creamery" newsletters stress the family's commitment to making healthful, great tasting cheese from milk produced in a humane and sustainable way. Recipes and tidbits about the farm entice customers to keep "eating cheese."

Melanie also introduces new cheeses and tells customers about the process.

Because the bull calves are raised outside, the veal meat is pink rather than white. They have several restaurants who purchase the veal because customers are very concerned that the animals are raised in a humane way.

Their parents continue to operate the dairy end, but Melanie helps with the daily milking.

"I love the cows. I make cheese so I can keep the farm sustainable and work with the cows," she said. "I don't raise cows to make cheese."

Both Melanie and Ian stress that their parents laid the groundwork for the farm that enables them to appeal to the socially conscious consumer concerned about animal care. The farm has not used pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers for 15 years.

The siblings market their products with the message that "our cows are raised in a humane and healthy way. They are not confined to a barn, instead they graze freely outside."

"Customers love our cheese that is named for our cows."

Before the cheese processing operation was set up, Melanie experimented in the family kitchen by making different types of cheese.

"It was a scary time because only feta cheese seemed to be turning out well in the kitchen," she said.

Nevertheless when the cheesemaking area was completed she mixed up the first batch — using 1,000 pounds of milk.

"It worked," Melanie said.

Cheesemaking, she explained, is a science. But weather affects the process and can required different amounts of time for the curds to form.

"Milk comes out of the cow at the right temperature for cheese making," Melanie said. After she adds the starter culture, the curd forms. When the cultured milk starts pulling away from the sides of the milk tank, Melanie places her hand on the top. If her imprint remains on the top, it isn't finished. It needs to pop back into position. Then it is cut into small pieces with a specialty-designed cheese knife.

"If you are too abusive at this stage, the protein and nutrients go out with the whey," Melanie said of the need to pay careful attention to the process.

Half the whey is drained off (fed to the pigs). Then cold water is added to make a higher moisture content and milder cheese. After the cold water is stirred in the remaining whey is drained. Salt is added, and the curds are packed into molds and set up the pressing table. Most varieties are pressed for two days.

She devised a cheese called Wallaby named after one of Ian's favorite cows. This variety has proven to be one of the most popular from the nine different cheeses that they make.

Most people starting a value-added business find marketing the most difficult and time consuming. But not Keswick Creamery — which means Old Cheese farm in Old English.

She said, "Marketing was easy. Farmers markets are looking for dairy-related stands. They opened their arms to us although a long waiting list existed for many other types of businesses wanting to enter the market."

Neither did Keswick have difficulty receiving licensing from the PDA.

"We found them helpful," Melanie said. "We had inspectors come before we had everything set up, and they made suggestions that were very helpful to us."

Melanie makes nine cheese varieties, each made from raw milk and naturally aged a minimum of 60 days: cheddar handcrafted the traditional English way, which gives it a creamy temperature and excellent flavor.

• Carrock is cheddar that has been aged nine months to give it a nice, sharp, crumbly texture.



The curds are the right consistency for the next step in the cheesemaking process.



Cheese wheels are stored in coolers to ripen from nine months to two years until the desired flavor is achieved.

• Monterey Jack is a mild semi-firm cheese with small holes.

• Feta is a brined cheese originally from Greece and the Mediterranean that has been aged 60 days and has a firm texture for slicing and grating.

• Italian Herbed Feta is like regular feta but with her own blend of Italian herbs before putting it in molds. Basil, oregano, parsley, and thyme make a flavorful feta for lasagna and pizza.

• Tomato and basil feta is regular feta mixed with dried tomatoes and basil great for crumbling on pasta and using in other cooked dishes or serve with crackers.

• Feta de province is a blend of French herbs with winter savory, thyme, rosemary, basil, tarragon, and lavender flowers excellent in cooking or with crackers.

• Dragon's Breath is a blend of jalapeno, habanero, and birdseye peppers.

They began by marketing the cheese at a Shippensburg farmers' market. Through invitation they now market at several others. The most successful is the Freshfarm Market in Washington, D.C.

"We all love attending market — my dad especially, and even my husband likes helping out," Melanie said. Her husband also uses his computer skills to provide graphics for the brochures and labels printed for Keswick Creamery.

In addition to Melanie and Ian, their other two siblings are also developing jobs to enable them to continue on the family farm.

Another sister followed her dream of working with horses, and trains horses and teaches riding lessons on the "back 40 acres" of the family farm. The youngest sibling is 20 and in the process of finding his niche on the family farm. He is raising shitake mushrooms in logs in the back woods of the farm.

"We all like being self-employed," Melanie said of herself and three siblings. "We always think positive."

Most amazing is the fact that possibly five families could make a living off a 100-acre farm.

"Dairy farming alone couldn't support more than one family, and with milk prices in the toilet now, I doubt even my parents

(Turn to Page B13)



Ian Dietrich cuts curds in the cheesemaking process. He feeds the drained whey to pigs kept on pasture. The pork is marketed frozen by the cut under the label Luscious Meadows. Bull calves are also raised on pasture and milk, and sold as pastured veal.



Melanie checks pH levels to assure exact levels for the cheesemaking process. She makes nine different varieties and is working on additional flavors.