

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Imagination Is the Right Tool at Chase Hill Dairy Farm

By Jonathan von Ranson, Editor, NOFA/Mass News

Compared to many jobs, being a farmer sounds mighty good. But how about to be a small New England dairy farmer with your spouse as your partner, making a good living selling your organic milk, beef and homemade cheese locally, treating your animals and the land kindly, and—here's the crazy part—having the time to imagine running your milking equipment on *horse power*...?

Mark and Jeannette Fellows of Chase Hill Farm in Warwick are an anomaly in dairy farming. Yes, they're parents of two daughters, age 11 and 13, and they own 30 milking cows and 100 acres of rumpled hill-town terrain (not the sort their classmates from Cornell School of Agriculture, '84, are looking for).

But Chase Hill Farm is the only organic dairy in Massachusetts, and it is making a decent living. It's one of the six dairies in the Our Family Farms group, which through good marketing and a favorable arrangement with a processor is able to pay farmers a premium for their milk. And Jeannette has developed a cheese business with outlets at farmers' markets, farmstands and food markets. Mark and Jeannette feel they're continually advancing as land stewards and improving their operation—refining production, fine-tuning their market approach. In conversation with them, you pick up unusually high job satisfaction. Several times they mentioned they're finding the time to dream. By all signs, they're in "the zone" and, instead of struggling like a fish on a hook, sending dairy-farmer distress signals, they're weaving the strands of family and community security through their work and daily lives.



They started right out of college, newly married, as classic, indebted new farmers. Early on, they attended a UVM dairy conference and took home a one-page handout about rotational grazing that seemed to make sense. Mark began moving his herd daily to new pasture, learning about pulsed grazing and its benefits to the land and the cows. This small step broke a piece of the New England farming mold Mark was born into, in which cows were kept on the same pasture for weeks. He remembers NOFA workshops around this time that offered intriguing techniques and paradigms that further opened his thinking, often done during milking, leaning against the cow's warm flank. He decided to give up growing

corn for silage, deciding "it's cheaper to buy it from the farms in the Valley" where it's easier to grow. But the economics of the Fellows' operation still didn't make sense. Like so many in their situation, they almost went under. "We were dying fast," Jeannette recalls.

Around 1990, Mark said, he noticed how "in summer, when the cows were on grass, the checkbook was overflowing. In the winter it was harder." After trying his brainstorm out on his vet (the vet playing Devil's advocate), "I decided to go seasonal."

Mark called that decision "the best thing I ever did," and said it had some interesting effects. "It made me like a big farmer. I have a big group of cows freshening at the same time, a big group of calves I'm raising of the same age. The cows come into heat about the same time, and, instead of watching them all year 'round, in May and June I take my granola into the field and watch them for signs of heat as I eat breakfast." In the late fall they're dried up all at once, and "Then I get four months off." (Maintaining a dry herd over the winter basically involves hauling hay and cleaning barn—easier than the summer regimen of milking, manure-spreading, breeding, fence-moving, haying).

After seasonal milking had settled into a pattern, "the next step was to become organic," Mark said. "We were profitable selling commodity milk. It's expensive to make the transition. We made the change because we could."



Jeannette, a woman of enthusiasm and drive, credits her husband “being open to other people’s ideas” and her own desire to “do something on the farm” for their farm’s eventual track record of profitability. They talk of each other’s complementary talents: Jeannette’s the public one, the “scientific” one, Mark the observer and tracker of detail .

Mark, calm and plain-spoken, commented how “all the decisions we made that worked best were the intuitive ones that popped into my head.” It’s as if he and Jeannette began approaching farming as an art instead of just tradition and science—experimenting, noticing fortuitous “mistakes,” giving their intuitions due weight.

They’ve become skeptical of strategies that involve purchases and claims of “more,” “faster,” “latest.” It’s more the opposite, judging by Mark’s comment about finding a way to run the milking equipment on horsepower. It may or may not come to something. The point right now is, they’re not struggling to pay off a loan for a new piece of equipment that was supposed to save the farm. Right now, they’re moving away from what little grain they feed further toward pure grassfed, which saves grain bills and produces milk with high Omega 3 fatty acids.

They got an infusion of cash when they sold the development rights in 2001 on their acreage to the state under the APR program, but said it’s not how they were able to create and equip an immaculate new cheese room for Jeannette’s cheese operation—the

money for that business expansion came out of milk profits.

Fifteen years after their early efforts, the Fellowses are trailblazers. They’ve let go of many of the mechanized, chemicalized short-cuts their New England dairy predecessors adopted when farming and food was judged differently—by price, basically. They’ve moved toward more complex, more self-sustaining, systems-oriented farming methods that produce a more natural, less industrially-influenced product. All this gives the soil, water and air a rest...and Mr. and Mrs. a seasonal one as well.

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3rd Annual NODPA Field Days A Huge Success

By Lisa McCrory and Nat Bacon