

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Taconic End, Farm Leicester, VT Catlin Fox, Annie Claghorn

by Lisa McCrory

Inspired by relatives on both sides of the family, Catlin and Annie are first generation farmers, setting an example of how to farm on a small scale and do it well. This year will be the 20th year that they have been dairying on their farm in Leicester, Vermont.

When asked what attracted them to farming, both had a story to tell; Catlin's grandfather was a homesteader in Michigan and he was enamored by the stories of life on his grandfather's farm. Working with the land and being so closely connected and dependent on Mother Nature seemed like the only real lifestyle choice for him. Annie was introduced to farming through her uncle and from this experience, she knew that her calling was to work with the land, raise animals, and grow her own food. Together, Catlin and Annie purchased Taconic End Farm in 1986, got their land certified organic, and dove right into living off a diversified farming income. Enterprises included a herd of 24 registered Jerseys, a market garden, garlic, and growing squash for Deep Root. Today, they no longer cater to vegetable markets, milk 30 registered Jerseys and ship their milk to Organic Valley.

Taconic End Farm consists of 90 acres of open land used for pasture and hay. The farm has always been a grass farm and they give a lot of credit to a local celebrity by the name of Bill Murphy, author of 'Greener Pastures on Your Side of the Fence'. Bill Murphy worked at UVM, teaching Voisin's rotational grazing, doing research on grazing management, and eventually commandeering a staff of 5 people who traveled to farms providing grazing technical assistance, and facilitating pasture walks & discussion groups.

Seasonal Dairy— In 1993 Annie and Catlin heard Larry Shearer (a producer in Massachusetts) speak at a workshop about seasonal dairying. He shared his methodology and the economics behind it – and they were sold. They had a spring-seasonal herd (milking late March – mid January) by 1995 and have not looked back. Seasonal dairying works well for this farm because they can make the most milk when the cows are on pasture, can feed a low protein grain, as there is plenty of protein in the pasture, and they are in sync with a seasonal cycle. They are busiest as the days get longer with down time during the darkest coldest time

of the year. Though they try to harvest the nicest hay possible for their cows, the pressure is not as high as their cows are dry for a good portion of the winter feeding. Some of the challenges with seasonal dairying are making sure all the cows and heifers get bred within a particular window of time. There are always a few that don't stay within the calving window and those animals

are sold as dairy stock in the fall or winter when income from milk sales are low to non-existent. "You must be ruthless about who goes and who stays", says Annie. This means there may be a favorite cow or calf who needs to be sold because they don't fit within the seasonal dairy plan. Another challenge with being a spring-seasonal dairy is that when they are busy with haying, they are also busy with calving and breeding and calf rearing.

Transition to Organic—in the midst of their change to seasonal milking, there was a market for organic milk developing in the state and The Organic Cow of Vermont was looking for more producers. Catlin and Annie had been waiting for this market to reach their area. They started transitioning early in 1996 and were shipping organic milk later that year. The transition to organic production was relatively simple for this farm; they were already grazing their animals, had already been using homeopathy and other natural products for 4 years, and their land was already certified. In 1996, the transition to organic required 100% organic feed and management for 3 months (as opposed to 1 year with today's standards). Catlin and Annie transitioned their

(Continued on page 20)



L to R: Clement Warnier (French visitor), Catlin Fox, Annie Claghorn, Lewis Fox.

(Continued from Featured Farm—Taconic End Farm, page 19)

herd during the dry period and since their livestock health and management already met the standards, their transition was painless with little to no additional cost.

Grazing System and Winter Feeding—Catlin and Annie have always considered themselves to be grass-farmers; they make as much milk from grass as possible keeping their cost of production low and the cows happy and healthy. They like working with their cows and don't care much for machinery, so whenever the cows can harvest their own feed, Catlin and Annie are happy to facilitate the process. The cows, calves and heifers graze from mid-April to the end of October, receiving the majority of their feed from pasture. Over the years, their grazing system has gotten more sophisticated; they have a field that they use exclusively for pasturing their calves, use laneways, and make sure that there is water available in every paddock.

To supplement their pasture, the cows are fed 12 lbs of a 10% Protein 'high energy pellet' from Green Mountain Feeds and kelp and salt is available free choice. Cows are given a new pasture after each milking and the dry cows and heifers follow the milkers in the grazing rotation as the clean-up group.

Calves are put out on pasture as soon as there is grass to graze – usually at about 6 weeks of age. They are raised in a group with electric fencing tape (more visible) and feed the calves by pouring the milk into a 50 gallon drum with peach teats all around the barrel. They graze exclusively on a piece of the farm where the cows do not graze to minimize exposure to parasites, and move the calves to a new paddock every 4 days. They supplement the pasture with an organic calf grain, kelp and Redmond salt and wean the calves at about 3 months of age. When the calves are drinking their milk, this is the time when Annie, Catlin or Lewis will spray some Ectophyte fly spray on the calves, and they will also make sure to put some fly spray on the udder and the ears. Not only does this keep the flies away, but it distracts the calves from sucking on one another right after the feeding frenzy.

In the wintertime, the cows and heifers are fed dry round bales outside with free choice kelp and salt.



When they are still milking, they are fed a 14% Protein grain and then zero grain during the dry period.

Preventive Health Practices and Treatments—

Most of the time Annie turns to homeopathic remedies for treating her livestock, though she also uses a number of other products including garlic tincture, aloe, nutritional boluses for cows and calves (from Crystal Creek, IMPRO and Agri-Dynamics), calcium products for prevention of milk fever and, in cases of severe illness, Dr Karreman's herbal tincture formula called "Antibiotic Formula". She has been trying a new approach to prevention of milk fever using a homeopathic remedy called Calc Phos (30 C potency). She gives Calc Phos to the cows one or two times at calving and has had great success and encourages others to try this out. Their vaccination program consists of vaccinating for Lepto before breeding, for pneumonia when the cows are dry and rabies before turnout in the spring.

For fly control Catlin and Annie decided to try using fly parasites through Spaulding Laboratories hoping to reduce the number of belly flies and horn flies on their farm. Fly parasites are mailed to them once a week to distribute around the barnyard, in the paddock the cows are grazing, the paddock the cows just left, and in the calf pasture. They also use Ectophyte (a fly product made by Agri-Dynamics) as a topical application on their livestock.

Using DHIA has been a valuable resource for Taconic End Farm; the 'hot sheet' lets them know each month if there is a cow having subclinical signs of mastitis enabling them to treat a cow before symptoms turn clinical. Their Somatic Cell Count is usually under 100,000.

Due to a past history with Coccidiosis, Annie has a preventative management program in place for her calves: 1) the calves move to a fresh paddock every 4 days, 2) calves get homeopathic remedies Ipecac 30C, Merc Corr (30C potency) once a day for a week, 3) give the calves Paradex, at weaning (herbal wormer containing black walnut hulls, garlic and wormwood), 4) free choice kelp and salt, 5) frequent monitoring, looking at manure, weight gain and attitude.

(Continued on page 21)

(Continued from Feature Farm—Taconic End Farm, page 20)

Continued Learning and Involvement in Organic Dairy World —Annie and Catlin are part of a local pasture discussion group that has been going on for over 8 years. They share information on grazing strategies, economics, animal health and more. They also have a very supportive collection of family, friends and neighbors, which makes their lifestyle choice even more rewarding.

Annie was an active member of Vermont Organic Milk Producers Association, which started in 1999 in response to milk market changes that were happening in the state. VOMPA was instrumental in the creation of NODPA in 2001 and Annie soon became a NODPA State Representative and has been recently elected to a Board position. Her involvement and representation as a Vermont producer has been and continues to be extremely valuable.

After hearing Chuck Schwabb's inspirational presentation on UNH's organic dairy plans (at the Northeast Sustainable Livestock Conference) last spring, Annie and Catlin have decided to donate a bred heifer which will be brought to UNH this fall. ♦