

A QUARTERLY FEATURE:

## Reviving the Creamery

Barb and Steve Smith

Steve and I, and a varying number of our five children, have been operating Meadowsweet Yogurt company on our very small dairy farm in Lodi, New York, in the Fingerlakes region, for 5 years now. We produce an extremely popular whole milk yogurt, kefir and raw milk hard cheeses with our very own hands here on our farm. All of our labor is family labor and all of our income is farm income. We have never worked harder in our lives and have never found our work so meaningful (raising children excepted).

We appreciate being asked to do a regular column for small dairy farmers, because particularly in the organic circles dairy farmers have been rather neglected. We will be mostly presenting the how-to's of doing on-farm dairy processing, but hope to cover other related areas such as raw milk benefits and restrictions, the low-fat scam, quality and taste of dairy products from a single herd, "bacteria farming," etc. When we were looking into the dairy processing business we found the lack of concrete information frustrating, particularly concerning finances. So we would like to fill the gap somewhat by discussing issues such as doing your own market analyses, choosing which product or products to make, the strengths and weaknesses of various marketing approaches, sources of information, learning and equipment, family and marriage considerations, the financial picture, and strategies for getting started. The column in this issue will be primarily an introduction to who we are, how we got into this business, what we are doing, and most importantly why we are doing this kind of farming rather than working in town. Naturally, everything we write will be from our own viewpoint and we will try to stick as much as possible to what we really know!

So back to meaningful work. Having meaningful work helps one get up in the morning. It keeps us going when things are tough and the work is backbreaking, as it so often is with farming. So what makes us feel that our work is meaningful? Having our efforts appreciated? Changing our lit-



tle corner of the world in a way that we believe is for the better? We all want to make a contribution to the world and feel that the work we do is meaningful but so many jobs are just jobs, both on farm and off farm, high income and lower income. While farming is in itself deeply satisfying work, and organic farming in particular, when farmers are too disconnected from those who eat the fruits of their labors it becomes less meaningful. Organic vegetable farmers have restored some meaning to their work by selling more locally through farmers' markets, CSA's etc. But dairy farmers have largely been left out of this trend, have no contact with those who use their milk, and so lose the consumer feedback that makes food production meaningful, and may instead see their farming in largely financial terms, which is often discouraging. We have discovered, almost by accident, the deep satisfaction that dairy farmers can derive from reinstating on-farm dairy processing and selling directly to local, and very grateful customers. We know that the labor, know how and commitment required in this business are considerable, and require plenty of care and planning, but in what other line of work do you have grateful customers thanking you for what you are doing on a weekly basis, and begging you to keep up the good work?

So how did we get to where we are today? In his former incarnation Steve was a physicist working for NASA in Huntsville, Alabama. While we raised and homeschooled our 5 children we gradually dab-

bled in farming: the usual motley crew of chickens, ducks, dairy goats... But Steve yearned to take the plunge, get out from behind his computer and be able to call himself a "real" farmer. Since neither of us had ANY farming background within memorable history it was not a leap of faith, but more like a jump off a cliff. As we cast about for plans and Steve continued to devour *Stockman Grass Farmer* and I reread *Malabar Farm* and the Nearings' books for the hundredth time (you can see what we had in mind), we came across an ad for a small family-run yogurt company near Canton, New York that was for sale. After a couple weeks of research by phone, asking every question I could dream up, talking to current and past buyers of the yogurt, store owners, distributors and customers to assure ourselves that it was a popular and delicious yogurt with a future, and assessing costs and income etc. we decided to buy the "company" which actually meant the name, the recipes, technical help (they never tired of answering our questions), and a small assortment of equipment. I won't bore you with the gory details of how we found a farm to buy near Ithaca ( a town deliberately chosen for its excellent potential as an organic foods market); sold our farm in Alabama; moved up here hauling behind us a stock trailer loaded with a double layer of sheep and lambs (don't ask); and in a span of 8 months had a former dairy farm reequipped (everything, including all barn fixtures, had been auctioned off 5 years earlier), learned to milk cows and farm (ha!) and had our first batch of Meadowsweet Yogurt on the store shelves in Ithaca. Forging ahead to the present, many thousands of dollars have passed under the bridge, so to speak, and we are beginning to get the hang of dairy farming and maybe thinking this is a sustainable operation. All the **really** gory ups and downs in between I will gloss over as they are familiar to any dairy farmer anyway.

Over the 5 years that we've been farming here we've tried a variety of configurations of numbers of cows, the amount of milk we process ourselves and the amount we ship to an outside company (first Pollio Cheese company and then certified organic milk to Butternut Cooperative to go to Stonyfield). After realizing we were not

## Reviving the Creamery

efficient enough to make shipping milk profitable, we finally decided to try to process **all** our own milk, which of course involved milking far fewer cows, which has many benefits in itself. This has been very satisfactory all around. Milking 5–10 cows means we can do all our own hay and maybe other feed supplements without too much trouble; scheduling our processing doesn't have to revolve around the milk truck's schedule; we don't need to maintain our organic certification (more on this later); and finally it has stimulated us to try many creative ideas to use the milk, ie different cheeses etc, which we wouldn't have been forced to try otherwise. To give you a more concrete feel for what's involved in farm dairy processing I'll detail a typical yogurt processing day for you.

On a yogurt-making day Steve is in charge of making the yogurt itself, which takes about 6 hours (for 2 hours the milk is pasteurizing, and then the yogurt cultures for about 3). Our oldest at-home daughter and I spend 2 hours in the morning preparing the flavorings and then in the afternoon the whole family gathers for about 3 hours to package the yogurt, assembly line fashion. This is all in addition to regular farm and household chores, making for a very long day once or twice a week. Every Friday Steve drives our insulated van into Ithaca and spends about 4 hours stocking the shelves in the three large grocery stores where we sell our yogurt and kefir. While he does the deliveries my daughter and I cut and package cheese to sell at the market the next day (from April through November I spend Saturdays at the Ithaca Farmers' Market selling all our milk products as well as organically-raised beef.) Each week we make about 100 gallons of yogurt, 25 gallons of kefir (a cultured milk drink similar to yogurt), and much of the year also one 80 gallon batch of hard cheese. So for most of the year, we are doing something with our milk, or our products, 5 days of the week.

Our products are extremely popular in Ithaca and we have a very loyal following that we hear from regularly: at market, on the phone and even by mail. (A fan who recently moved to Seattle asked us to figure out how to ship our yogurt to her out

there!) We have come to realize that we have not begun to satisfy the wants of our customers for quality, organic dairy products: I get requests every week for cream, soft cheeses, cottage cheese, etc. If we can make it they will buy it, and the farmers' market is an easy way to market everything we make. Because of our eager local customer base we have decided not to sell outside of our local area, though we did use a distributor to other parts of the state at one time. This decision has been difficult because we are continually getting requests to sell our products in other areas and states. But for us the greater control and ability to get customer feedback that direct local marketing affords is worth limiting our distribution, although this in turn forces us to diversify our product line rather than increase our distribution area in order to grow.

We entitle this column "Reviving the Creamery" because the creamery, the room on the farm where, traditionally, dairy farmers separated their cream for shipping, bottled milk and possibly made cheese or butter, symbolizes for us the satisfaction and pride that comes from selling high-quality dairy products directly to very loyal and grateful customers; the control that small farmers need to have over their market and their pricing; and the potential that still exists to operate a small, healthy and diversified dairy farm you and your family can be proud of.

---

The Smith family makes Meadowsweet Yogurt, kefir and hard raw milk cheeses on their organic dairy farm in Lodi, New York. Steve and Barbara presented a workshop on small-scale dairy processing at the NOFA-NY conference in January.

---

Reprinted from Organic Farms, Folks and Foods, the quarterly newsletter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, Inc., (©2002 by NOFA-NY), an organization dedicated to the creation of a sustainable regional food system which is ecologically sound and economically viable. For permission to reproduce more copies contact NOFA-NY at: 518-534-5495. Please include this message in any reprints.