

A bootstrap story

Ag Proud Managing Editor **Lynn Jaynes**

“This was a worn-out dairy when I came 10 years ago,” says Eric Evans of Evans Dairy near Castleford. “It originally had a double-four parlor with grain feeder but was built for Holsteins.” Eric wanted to milk Jerseys, and the cow size difference required some remodeling anyway, so he remodeled the parlor to work as a double-nine.

Eric was managing a 2,000-cow dairy in Utah when he saw the Castleford property on the market. Eric and his wife, Misty, started with a few cows Eric had brought with him, a good relationship with a co-worker (Rogeilo, who would eventually become the herd manager) and an idea of what they wanted to achieve.

“It was just time,” Eric says. It was time to take his cows, his and Rogeilo’s families and see what they could do on their own.

“We did everything ourselves – or if we didn’t do it ourselves, then we traded work with friends,” Eric says. “We infused a little cash from our purebred Rottweiler business on occasion and paid for the improvements out of pocket as we went along, but we didn’t go fancy. We got some used trusses from a neighbor and some used siding, but we knew what we wanted and didn’t cut corners, either.”

The farm consisted of two homes and 40 acres, hardly enough land to produce all the feed they would need for 150 cows. So they converted to a grazing dairy and split the acreage into 13 irrigated paddocks – 11 for the milking string rotation and two for the dry cow pastures. While the dry cows rotate pastures every three weeks, the milking string rotates to a new paddock every day. “They’re funny creatures,” Eric says. “If you put them back in the same pasture you took them out of, they turn up their noses and won’t eat, but if you bring them back to that pasture even just one day later, they act like it’s a brand-new pasture. You have to outsmart them.”

Misty had maintained her job as a registered nurse when they first got the farm. In fact, the nursing job was her security for a long time. “But then I could see the farm needed more help,” she says, “and we thought if we started making

cheese to increase the revenue stream, it would help justify the transition of me working on the dairy – but only if we could develop it economically.”

Misty started learning the cheese-making business, and Evans Farmstead Cheese was born. She read a lot, watched YouTube videos, talked to others in the business and took a class from a French cheesemaker. Her own science background suited her well in the cheese endeavor, but Misty says, “Recipes made me relearn math. There are so many conversions, teaspoons to grams or vice versa, and figuring the weight of the fulcrum press on the cheese mold, and a hundred other little things.” She also had to figure out the cultures and flavors and decide what they could sell and what likely wouldn’t.

“It’s a lot of work to get it from the cow to the consumer,” Misty says. Eric and Misty had an idea of what the labor divisions would be for them both when they started, but quickly found they needed to be flexible and let their jobs morph into a more natural fit.

“It’s hard physically,” Misty says, “and I realized I couldn’t do it on my own. I just don’t have the stature to handle all the lifting. And Eric is naturally up at 4 in the morning anyway for the milking, so it made sense for him to get the milk ready and the cultures started. Then after the kids were fed and off to school or their activities, I could come out about 8 or 8:30 and get started on the rest of the process.” Not to leave the kids out – all but one of the seven play some role in the process today – from regular chores to

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—Eric Evans of Evans Dairy near Castleford

tending farmers markets. “So it was really divide and conquer. Our roles evolved into me doing what I can do and Eric doing what he can do,” Misty says. Eric collects the 53 gallons of milk needed every morning to fill the vat as it comes directly from the cows. The rest of the milk is shipped to a processor.

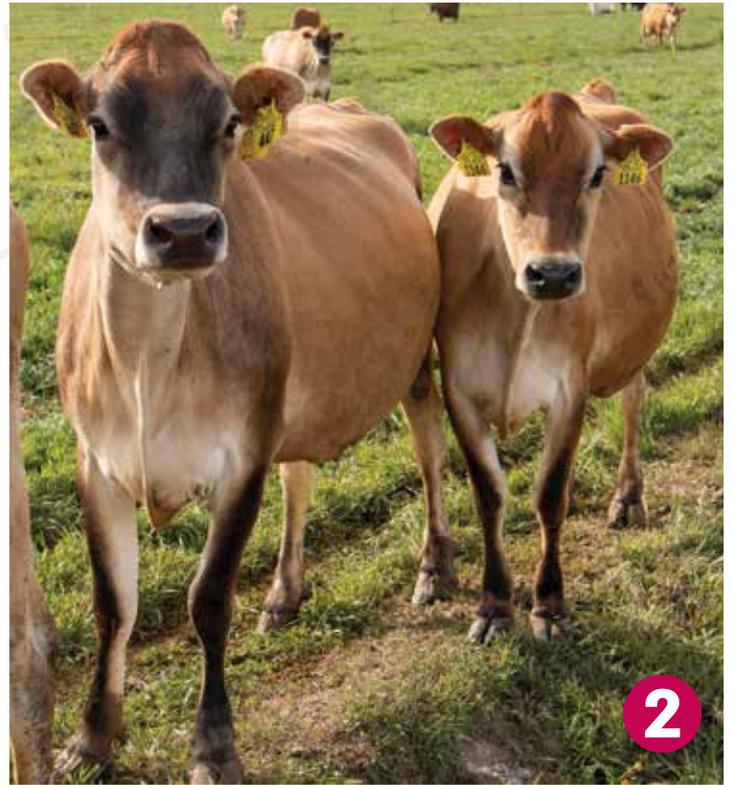
They’re two years into it now – making cheese and selling it online and at farmers markets or home shows around Idaho. “Our goal,” Eric says, “was to hit a certain dollar amount per month in gross cheese sales, and we hit that three or four months last year, so it’s building. It helps level out the ebb and flow in the milk market.”

But it’s not cheap. For instance, “See that cheese mold?” Eric asks as he points to four neoprene bucket-like containers. “Each one costs about 250 dollars new – and that’s just the mold.”

Misty laughs, “Don’t let anyone tell you they can make cheese cheaper than you can buy it in the store.” They found a used vat with a water jacket heater on it, and their press consists of a weighted water bucket on a fulcrum to press out the whey. “It’s not high tech, but it works,” Eric says.

They currently make 23 varieties. “It’s not which cheese do we want to do,” Eric says, “but which ones *can* we do?” Shorter-aged cheeses have to start with pasteurized milk, and that requires a different equipment outlay and design. The varieties Evans make require a 60-day curing process. Initially, cheese

Continued on page 30



- 1 Misty Evans displays a roll of labels ready to apply to cheese packaging.
- 2 Curious Jersey cows at Evans Dairy near Castleford take a break from grazing (trying to understand, no doubt, why someone would stand at a fence and take their pictures).
- 3 Eric Evans sets the cheese curds in the molds and adjusts the fulcrum to press out the whey.

Photos by Lynn Jaynes.



Photo by Lynn Jaynes.

Eric and Misty wrap cheese and set out a few samples for guests in preparation for the upcoming farmers markets and online orders.

A bootstrap story, cont'd from page 28

wheels are turned several times a week and are kept at 55°F for the full 60 days.

Marketing has been another trial-and-error process. Misty says, “Some farmers markets do well, others don’t, and some are sporadically worth it. Area ‘other’ shows have begun to play a bigger part of our strategy – like home shows or garden shows. I don’t know why that is – you’d think a farmers market would be better, but sometimes the parking is difficult or the people you work with are just cross, and each show has a personality, and sometimes things don’t run smoothly. And other times those ‘other shows’ just really surprise you and provide the most buyers.”

“And we’re always working on new varieties, trying different things,” Misty says. They’re working with Holesinsky Winery on combined wine and cheese tasting events, and they’re experimenting with soaking a cheese wheel in wine for different time periods “to see what it will take up and how it affects the flavors,” Eric says.

Misty adds, “Our new feta has become popular. It’s stored in seasoned oils, so the oil can be drained or used directly as a bread-dipping condiment. So it’s fun to try new things, even if some of them fail,” she says.

Some in the dairy industry claim you have to have thousands of milk cows to make the enterprise feasible. Yet dairies like Evans’ prove them wrong every day. **AG**

Go to evansfarmsteadcheese.com to learn more about Evans Farmstead Cheese.



Check out this episode!

Livestock judging at the county fairs

In a recent podcast, Homedale’s FFA adviser and ag teacher Shane Wetzel tells us what it’s like to be the livestock judge at the county fairs and jackpot shows. He also talks about some of the disconnect between show animals and commercial animals and talks about changes throughout the industry that youth can learn from to increase their successes in the show ring.



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