



Fleckvieh offers good health, good fertility and trouble-free milk production

Bavarian breed's offers benefits

Switching to Fleckvieh is improving cow longevity and ease of management, without compromising milk yield in many UK herds. And an added benefit is more valuable bull calves. Here's what one Cumbria-based producer has to say.

text **Rachael Porter**

A trip to Austria more than 20 years ago was the spark that lit Brian Barnes' interest in the Fleckvieh breed. And today he and his son Terry are five years into a cross breeding programme that's seen their herd's healthy, fertility and profitability move forward in leaps

and bounds. The 100-cow herd, based near Kirby Lonsdale in Cumbria, was originally Holstein but is now about 50% Fleckvieh, according to Brian. "We've some second-cross heifers that are about to calve now, so we're quite excited to see how they'll milk," he says, adding

that he's no apprehensions whatsoever. "The first crosses milk really well – with plenty of volume and constituents. We're definitely heading the right way with this breed and eventually we will be milking a pure Fleckvieh herd."

He and Terry first used Fleckvieh semen 10 years ago and the resulting heifers were what Brian describes as 'superb'. "But we then struggled to get hold of any Fleckvieh semen, so we dabbled with some Norwegian Red and Montbelliarde sires."

Sourcing semen

He says he wasn't so struck with these cross breeds in his herd so he was glad when he sourced some more Fleckvieh semen from Geno UK. Avoncroft also sells Fleckvieh semen.

"The Monty crosses just didn't cut it on our unit. I wasn't so keen on their temperament and I'd seen just how much better the Fleckvieh crosses were. These are cattle that carry some meat on them, but milk and calve easily. They also have good fertility and health and we find them easy to manage. They will also look after themselves."

His Holstein herd was struggling with lameness and fertility problems. The

Hardy breed: the Fleckviehs suit the Barnes' climate and management system



Fleckvieh cattle. The Barnes' have no trouble getting them back in calf.

Milk quality

And they have found that the Fleckvieh crosses are more persistent in their lactation – they give higher yields for longer. “So we’re in no rush to dry them off. The milk quality also seems to increase later in the lactation, with some touching 5% butterfat towards the end,” explains Brian.

Cows and heifers are dried off four or five weeks prior to calving. “And I’d say that there’s only one negative to Fleckviehs at this point and that’s that you have to feed them carefully through this transitional period because they have a tendency to put on too much condition and become fat.”

The only other drawback of the Fleckvieh switch is that the Barnes are having to be patient. “We want to increase herd numbers, but we have to wait for our youngstock to mature. It’s difficult – if not impossible – to buy in milking Fleckviehs and we’re only seeing about three heifers in every 10 calves born.

“Terry is even more of an enthusiast for the breed than I am, so I know I just have to be patient. If I went out and bought some Holsteins to keep herd numbers up I know I’d get into a lot of trouble. He wouldn’t be pleased because we want to remain as a closed herd.”

Hardy grazers

And the breed is just too well suited to the unit’s topography and climate for the business partners to consider milking anything else. “We’re in a valley here. The weather can be quite good, but it’s also very changeable. Fleckvieh thrive in both hot and cold weather. When I saw those Fleckviehs in Austria

former is now down to less than 1% of the herd and those with problems are Holsteins. “Lameness in the Fleckviehs is unheard of in our herd. We’ve yet to see any problems.

“Holsteins simply didn’t last in our herd, due to health and fertility problems. We’re seeing six or seven lactations with the Fleckvieh crosses – double the number of lactations we were getting from our Holsteins.”

Fertility isn’t an issue with the



Brian and Terry Barnes

Father and son agree that Fleckvieh genetics are the way forward on their Cumbria-based unit. The breed offers milk, longevity and higher value bull calves.



Herd size:	100 milkers
Average milk yield:	7,500 litres
Butterfat and protein:	4.40% and 3.45%
Average calf price:	£300 (2013)

they were 4,000 feet up a mountain in driving rain and still grazing! They are very good grazing cattle.”

The Barnes’ herd calves all year round and is fed on grass silage, plus a blend, during the winter month. Cows graze from May to November. First cross heifers typically produce around 7,500 litres in their first lactation, with good constituent levels of around 4.4% butterfat and 3.45% protein.

“We were on a cheese-producing contract, but we’re in the process of moving to Dale Farm at Kendal. We’ll get a better price for our milk and it’ll be used to make yoghurt,” explains Brian. Another big plus is the value of bull calves. Calf prices averaged around £250 in 2012 and Brian thinks this figure will be more than £300 for 2013.

“I sold an eight-week-old second-cross Fleckvieh bull calf for £412 in October. I think that was the record for this year so far.

“Our accountant worked out that it’s adding an extra 1.3ppl to our milk price. So I’m extremely pleased with calf sale revenues.”

Cull cow prices are good too and Brian says he sees an extra 50p/kg for the crosses compared to Holsteins: “That works out as an extra £250 a head. It really is a pleasure to go to market to sell stock these days. I never come home disappointed.

“We really do feel as if the Fleckvieh offers a double bonus – better quality milk and higher value calves. We’re really happy with the direction we’re taking with our herd’s breeding – and the direction that that’s taking our management and bank balance!”

Tomorrow’s milkers: Terry and Brian are keen to increase the size of the milking herd

