

The Ter Hofte family emigrated to South Africa and may move to Botswana

Survival of the fittest

Extreme rainfall or drought, cows that die from snake bites, and a huge variation in milk price. Dairying in South Africa cannot be compared with running a unit in The Netherlands or the UK, according to the Ter Hofte family. They milk 1,250 cows but their sights are once more directed further afield. Neighbouring country Botswana beckons.

text Inge van Drie

The rain has made large holes in the gravel road that leads to the farm of Rob, Erica, Engbert and Tes ter Hofte. In just one day 170mm of rain was more than the road system could cope with. "Even the milk tanker got stuck on the farm yesterday," says Engbert.

A day later the stress has evaporated and the young farmer seems to have everything under control again. He is used to the fact that his days do not turn out as he had expected.

"South Africa is not like The Netherlands





Engbert and Tes ter Hofte

In the 1990s the Dutch Ter Hofte family bought a dairy farm in South Africa. Today they are milking 1,250 cows.



Herd size:	1,250
Annual milk production:	Seven million kg
Herd average:	1,200kg per 100kg body weight
Unit size:	580 hectares

or the UK, where everything usually goes according to plan. Here you have to be flexible and be able to change plans quickly. The politics, the climate – anything can change at any time.”

The family, who originally came from The Netherlands, have 1,250 cows, which produce seven million litres of milk each year and are split between two units. Some are based at Splendor, a tenanted unit with 380 hectares of cultivable land. “We prefer to invest as little as possible in land and buildings. We primarily invest the money in the cows,” says Engbert. “Here at Splendor we have a hi-tech farm and Soetfontein is our low-cost farm.”

Cross breeding

The difference is clear to see. A simple, 20-year-old swing-over milking parlour is used at Soetfontein – there’s no place here for electronics. But at Splendor the cows wear pedometers and pass twice a day through a 60-stall outdoor rotary that has, among other things, a weighing device.

“Cows that, in a short space of time, lose 10% of their bodyweight or 20% of their milk production are automatically separated, just like cows with very high or low activity.”

On average the cows weigh about 500kg, as shown by the measurement in the milking parlour. Engbert is pleased with this as he dislikes heavy cows. He does not express his milk production in kilogrammes per cow but in kilogrammes of milk per 100kg body weight. On

average his cows produce 1,200kg per 100kg body weight. The best South African farms score 1,400kg.

A long line of cows is walking towards the milking parlour. Brown, white, black and red – the herd is a mixture of colours. The Ter Hoftes practise rotational cross-breeding: Holsteins x Jersey x Swedish red and white x red Holstein. “Holsteins are excellent milking cows, but they are too big and they cannot walk very well. We can’t have that on our farm. Every day our cows walk a long way.”

The Ter Hoftes select all-round bulls with extra protein. “We supply our milk to a cheese factory. The contents contribute two thirds to the milk price and the volume one third.”

The milk price varies greatly. “In winter 2011 we saw 33ppl. That is the highest we have ever had. But in 2012 we got 22ppl.”

Extreme drought

There are no subsidies from the government to rely on when times are tough. And the weather doesn’t always help.

“In 2009 and 2010 we had to cope with extreme drought. They were difficult years. Here there are many units with 1,000 cows. You need these numbers, particularly at a time when margins are low, just to be able to carry on. In South Africa during the past few years hundreds of farms have given up. It really is survival of the fittest.”

For the producers cash flow is the most important part of business management. “In a very bad year we can always slaughter the lower end of the herd. That immediately provides funds and we then hardly have to buy any more feed. In principle we can survive just on grass.”

Engbert skilfully manoeuvres his pick-up truck over the many holes in the road. The nearest village is 60km away, but the cattle breeder is now on the way to his second farm, Soetfontein, for the daily inspection. It is 12km away from the other farm. Every month some of the cows also travel this route. “If the cows are in the second half of their lactation and their production drops below 15 or 20kg of milk, they go to Soetfontein.”

The cows take between three and four hours to travel the 12km journey. “The Jerseys go in front, then the crossbreeds and the Holsteins bring up the rear.” Owing to the fact that they walk a lot

their claws rarely have to be trimmed. “The claws wear away themselves. Out of 1,250 cows we never have more than three or four cows that are lame,” says Engbert.

Hoof health may be very good but the herd certainly has trouble with other health problems. Fertility, for example, is one of the key reasons why cows leave the herd. “We culled 10% of the herd in 2012 due to poor fertility. We inseminate cows only until they’re producing 15kg of milk.”

In 2012 3.4% of the cows on the farm died – one third at calving, one third due to ticks, and another third due to snake bites and other accidents. “We would wish for 2%, but that’s difficult here. We select strictly by calving ease. The cows also regularly pass through a spray tunnel to control ticks. If we didn’t do that we would lose a lot more cows.”

The family is also meticulous with regard to udder health. On the hi-tech



Milking time: 250 cows pass through the parlour per hour