

**Jonny Crickmore**

His dairy business is increasing on-farm processing capacity – and its range of unpasteurised products – to secure a profitable and sustainable future.



Herd size: **300 cows**

Annual milk production: **Two million litres**

Milk processed on farm: **8%**

Recent investment: **£35,000**

Dairy business thrives, despite economic downturn

# Raw milk makes it mark

The current squeeze on global milk prices has hit UK producers hard. And Suffolk's few remaining dairy herds are also, once again, facing extremely tough times. We find out how one business is thriving thanks to on-farm processing.

text **Rachael Porter**

The number of dairy herds in Suffolk has dwindled from 45 in 2008 to just 30 at the start of 2015, according to DairyCo figures. But the good news is that the dairy businesses that remain in the county have adapted and are thriving, thanks to sound business acumen, innovative thinking and the ability to spot and supply niche markets. Exciting innovations are certainly a foot at Bungay-based Fen Farm Dairy, owned and managed by Jonny and Dulcie Crickmore, who farm in partnership with Jonny's parents Graham and Frances. The couple sell the majority of the milk produced by their 300-cow herd – about two million litres a year – to Dairy Crest. But around 8% of production is either sold direct to local customers from the

farm gate, via a vending machine, as 'raw' unpasteurised milk, or processed into their very own cheese – called Baron Bigod. This is a creamy, white bloomy-rind cheese, which is handmade on the farm by Jonny and the team. "It's like a brie and has a smooth, silky texture and a golden curd," says Dulcie, adding that it is also a big hit with the locals and is sold through another vending machine at the farm gate.

## Milk sales

The business invested in cheese making facilities – an existing barn was converted into a dairy with storage – in 2013. Sales of the raw milk and unpasteurised cheese have grown through word of mouth and the use of social media. So far there's been

no formal marketing campaign. "We do sell a little via a local milk delivery business – Foulgers Dairy – and at local farmers' markets. We also sell our milk on line. It's delivered over night and packed with ice to keep it cool. But we have to be careful about how much we sell via these routes due to legislation. We're not allowed to sell through shops, unless it is our own farm shop," explains Dulcie.

Milk from the 210-litre DF Italia vending machine costs consumers £1 ppl and considerably more via mail order at £3 ppl. "This is to cover the high costs of postage and packing."

She says that the appeal for many customers is that it's unpasteurised and it's local. "They want to reconnect with

Farm 'shop': road-side shed houses vending machines for unpasteurised milk and cheese

Vending vessels: eye-catching polybottles





Milking time: the herd returns from grazing and heads to the 28:28 herringbone parlour

where their food is produced. And their priority is to spend their money on good food. They're not interested in buying cheap milk from the supermarkets. Some are also buying our raw milk for health and dietary reasons.

"One thing that all our customers have in common is their loyalty – sales are steady throughout the year. And we have people travelling as far as 30 miles on a regular basis to buy our milk. They'll bring several plastic bottles to fill up for the freezer – the milk freezes well."

### Calving pattern

The herd is milked through a Westfalia 28:28 herringbone parlour, which was expanded in 2013. It has cushioned flooring for operator comfort and ADF automatic dipping and flushing clusters, as well as Northern Dairy Equipment Teat Saniclean system, to speed up milking without compromising udder health and milk quality.

Self service: each litre costs £1.00



The herd is autumn block calved at the moment, but Jonny says that they're moving towards a split calving pattern – from September to November and between February and April – in a bid to level out supply.

### Gravity fed

The future will also see the Crickmores processing most, if not all, of their herd's milk on farm. Plans are in place to produce raw cultured butter and cream and a new butter and cream making plant, costing around £35,000, is currently under construction.

"Both products will add a lot of value to our milk and help us to thrive, even in times of milk price volatility. The end products will be very special – the cream in particular will be 'the bee's knees'. Top restaurants in London are already queuing up to buy top quality cream and butter and we know that it'll be in huge demand," says Jonny.

Holstein cows: this breed is being replaced by Montbeliarde and Brown Swiss crosses



The trick will be to maintain the 'cottage industry' scale of their current processing business. "We're going to invest in some hand-operated machinery. The trick is to try to do everything as gently as possible," explains Dulcie. "That way we don't damage the milk in any way. At the moment, our processing plant is gravity fed – we don't use any pumps. And I think that this gives our milk and cheese a delicate texture and flavour."

The couple is also in the process of switching dairy breed. Around 50% of the herd currently comprises Montbeliarde and Brown Swiss crosses, with the remainder pure Holstein. "We're phasing out the Holsteins," says Jonny. "The cross-bred cows and heifers are far more suited to our management system, which aims to maximise milk from forage, and the milk is also better for processing – particularly for making cheese. And the cross-breeds are easier to manage, which is very important when we have to find time to dedicate to processing and marketing our dairy produce."

The pair certainly have their work cut out, but with a strong team of passionate and skilled staff, the third-generation producers are optimistic about the future. "There are only a handful of dairy producers left in Suffolk and, UK wide, many producers are leaving the industry," says Jonny. "But we've invested in good facilities, quality staff and we've found a niche. We're excited about the future." |

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