

Focusing on forage is a recipe for success

Good timing is everything

One Cheshire-based producer sees his diet formulation like a recipe from the Great British Bake Off. And using the right ingredients, at the right time, leads to a real showstopper!

We spoke to him to find out more.

text **Emily Ball**

Forage quality is key to business performance, according to Adrian Smith. And he has worked hard to develop the right grass leys and fully utilise inputs at his 200-cow unit in Middlewich. He also analyses the performance of each grazed and silage area in order to build a complete picture of forage performance. “We’re not just growing grass, we’re growing the ingredients for the cows’ diet,” he says. “In fact, with our silage we’re really growing a range of ingredients for different ‘recipes’ – one

for the high yielders, another for the low yielders, another for the dry cows and so on. The whole farm pivots around grass and forage quality and it is key to business efficiency – the clamps and paddocks are our bank and our pantry.” Adrian’s Holstein cows are currently averaging 8,600 litres and are on track to produce 5,500 litres per cow from forage this year.

“We’ve worked hard to develop a range of leys and quality across our grass silage to meet the needs of all our livestock.



Adrian Smith: “We’re growing ingredients for the cows’ ration – not just grass”

We have land in 11 different farming agreements, more than six miles apart, but constant monitoring and assessment of the land, and the crops it produces, is leading to great results.”

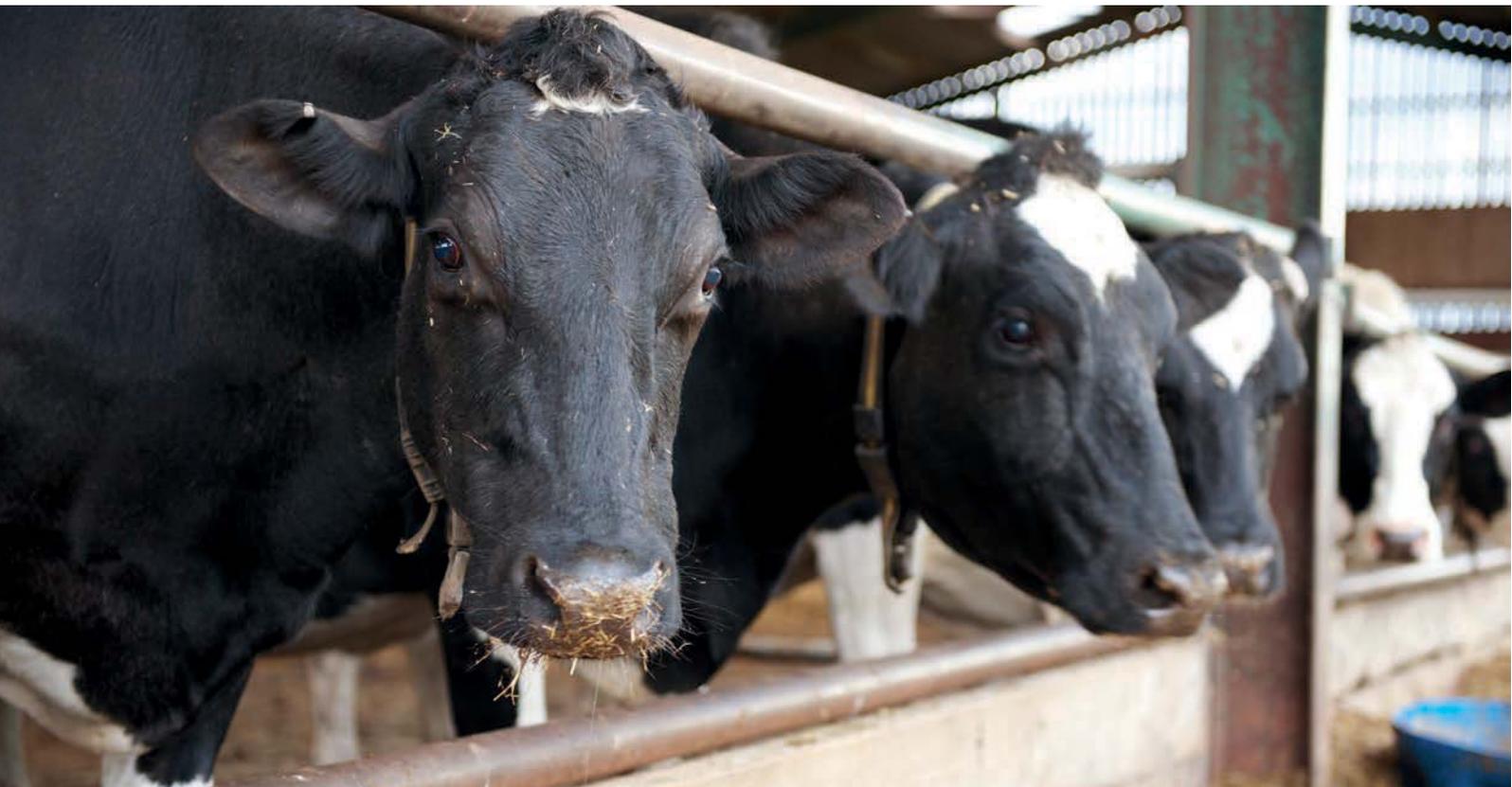
Simple system

Adrian feeds a simple cow ration – a combination of high quality grazing in season, with grass silage and maize at other times and concentrate fed in parlour.

“When we started dairying we couldn’t afford to buy a feeder wagon, even though I desperately wanted one. Instead we had to focus on getting the best possible results from the resources we had on farm and, over time, I’ve come to realise that this is the most efficient way for us to feed our cows.”

Challenging every aspect of dairy management, in particular forage management, has always been Adrian’s way, and the results can be seen in

Winter feeding: the herd’s ration is formulated to suit the balance of grass and maize silage





Forage mapping: all the unit's big-baled silage is carefully numbered

both forage analysis and business performance. Concentrate use stands at 0.18kg/litre and purchased feed costs are 3.74ppl, down nearly 12% for the year ending in October.

Managing farm inputs, particularly farmyard manures, is key. Slurry, FYM and dirty water is always available and used when appropriate. Adequate storage capacity means that Adrian can use each input when it best suits the system, rather than when storage areas are full.

Silage clamps

All silage clamps are mapped and labelled, and all big bale silage is carefully numbered, with a record kept of the paddock it was made in. Adrian uses this information to make sure that the right animals get the right quality feed at the right time. But it is also used as a tool for deciding which leys to reseed and when. Between 20% and 25% of silage ground and 12% of the grazing area at the unit is reseeded each year. Soil and forages are analysed regularly and forage palatability and intakes are monitored. The benchmark is a minimum of 16kg forage dry matter intake per cow during the winter.

"The relationship you have with your contractor is key to the quality of your forage," says Adrian. "Keep them informed of activity on the farm and

make it an enjoyable place to work – providing food and drink can work wonders. We pay the contractor an hourly rate, rather than by area, so it's not just a numbers job for them and everyone is committed to getting the best possible quality forage.

"We are continually benchmarking our performance against other producers, evaluating our performance and adapting where necessary. As a result, we've developed a range of leys that suit our needs and this year we took smaller and more frequent cuts of silage to help ensure we produced the highest quality forage."

Fibre intake

With such high quality forage, typically 39.5% dry matter with 17.4% crude protein and an ME of 11.7 MJ, fibre intake and energy source can be an issue. So Adrian works closely with ForFarmers' Nick Johns to make sure that the concentrates he feeds balances silage.

"The forage at Brook House Farm is analysed three times a year because Adrian is keen to get as much data as possible on which to base his diet decisions," explains Nick. "After each set of results are in we sit down and formulate the ration. We first check the forage intake and then select a concentrate that is most suitable,

depending on the balance of grass to maize silage and the grass silage that is currently in the 'pantry'.

"The only other ingredients we feed are a high protein, 66% molasses, which is fed to complement the maize silage, and a bespoke mineral, which is formulated to suit the lower yielders that are getting very low levels of concentrates.

"Adrian's approach has always been to pay attention to detail in all aspects of grass and forage production and storage," says Nick. "He treats the land with respect and it pays him back.

"He aerates and subsoils where necessary and controls traffic on paddocks. He times his re-seeds and harvests, particularly maize, with an eye on the needs of the soil. This level of attention pays off when it comes to cow performance."

Adrian's cows are already producing 5,500 litres from forage but he is continuing to innovate and push the boundaries of what is possible. "We're aiming to get another 150 litres per cow from forage next year and I don't think that 6,000 litres is unachievable in the future.

"The biggest threat to any business is complacency. So I always strive to do things better and ask myself, and others, how I can improve. I use this information to keep my business moving forward," he concludes. |