



Living the cheese-making dream

On-farm processing has provided an additional income stream for one Wiltshire-based unit and allowed a career dream and lifestyle change to become a reality for one enterprising couple.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

The herd at Hill End Farm is steeped in tradition. Not only is the Brinkworth herd of pedigree Holstein Friesians, based near Chippenham, one of the oldest in England – established in 1910 by William Collingborn – but it is also where he once made Wiltshire Loaf cheese by hand. The herd is still going strong, now under the careful management and watchful eyes of grandson Joe and his wife Ro. Their daughter, Ceri Cryer, and her husband, Chad, have also returned to join the family business and revived the farmhouse cheese making tradition. Ceri, who won Women In Dairying’s Dairy Industry Woman of the Year regional award in 2018, and Chad began the processing side of the business back in 2005. “Prior to that we were both teachers, but I wasn’t

enjoying it – and neither was Chad. We decided it was time to do something different and began looking at possible on-farm diversifications.”

Cheese production, which would add value to the herd’s milk and provide an additional stream of income to support the couple, was the best fit. Making a traditional regional cheese – Wiltshire Loaf – was something that Ceri’s great grandfather used to do. “I thought it would be a good idea to make it the way he would have done – by hand and in small batches. That would make sure it was a special and unique product and, potentially, command a good price.”

Ceri began by taking a course in cheese making and then practicing in her kitchen with a saucepan, at first, and then a bucket. Chad then bought her a 700-litre cheese making vat as an engagement present and additional equipment has been added gradually, to help make the process quicker and easier. “And also to ensure that we meet food hygiene standards and regulations,” adds Ceri. Growth has been ‘organic’: “I’m conservative when it comes to taking risks. We said, from the start, that we’d begin small and expand gradually.”

Cheddaring process

Today the business makes cheese using a cheddaring process in 140-kilogramme batches, three days a week, in the run up to busy sales periods, and just once a week at the quieter times of year.

COMPANY PROFILE



Name	: Collingborn family
Pictured	: Ro (centre), her daughter Ceri Cryer, and grandson Eric
Herd size	: 120 cows
Average yield	: 7,025kg per cow
Cheese production	: 7,250kg per year



That requires a morning's milk production, three times a week. The majority of the milk produced by the 120-cow herd is sold to First Milk.

The enterprise makes 7,250kg of cheese each year and now also produces yogurt, butter, cream and ice-cream (on a seasonal basis). "And we're also bottling milk too," says Ceri. Their produce is sold through weekend farmers' markets in Stroud and London, and the business also supplies wholesalers across the UK.

Ceri and Chad have recently extended their range to include the cultured, fermented milk drink called kefir: "It's customer driven – people were constantly asking for it at the farmers' markets, so we knew that the demand was there. And we also know that it's important to be able to offer as full a range of products for sale as possible."

Processing efficiency is another area that Ceri is always looking to improve, and she is keen to grow the business. "Adding some scale would help us here. It would allow us to take on a manager, so I can take a step back and focus on marketing and generating more sales."

Tweaking rations

Making more from the milk that the enterprise 'buys' from the dairy herd is also essential. "That starts with milk analysis and ensuring that the fat and protein is right for cheese production. To optimise cheese yield and quality, we're looking for a fat-to-protein ration or 0.7:0.8 for Wiltshire Loaf, which is quite firm in texture. This ratio will vary for different cheeses, depending on whether they're hard or soft," says Ceri.

"We work hard, particularly at tweaking the herd's ration, to reduce variation as possible. It's all about consistent constituents."

The dairy herd is managed and run by her parents, with some part-time help. Joe Collingborn takes charge of milking and day-to-day management and her mother, Ro, is a cattle breeding enthusiast and in charge of the herd's breeding. The milking herd is currently averaging 7,025 litres of milk, at 4.20% butterfat and 3.33% protein. Around 3,822 litres is from forage and the Collingborns would like to see that up around 4,000 litres in 2019.

A traditionally managed herd, the grazing season usually starts in late February even though the land at Hill End Farm is predominantly heavy clay and also prone to flooding. Housed – usually from late October – cows are fed a ration of grass silage and brewers' grains during the winter. Cows are also topped up to yield through the parlour, with a 16% protein concentrate. And this is one area where Ceri and the herd nutritionist do get involved. "Just to ensure that

the milk is best suited to processing. We like to have a hand in ration formulation to influence the constituent ratios. The more we do at the 'cow' end, the less we have to do in the cheese-making room." And the extra effort is paying off.

Once processed into one of their many dairy products, Ceri says that they're realising around £1.20 for every litre of milk. "But a diversification like this is far from easy. It's hard work," she adds. "Adding value – be that through making cheese or any of our other dairy products – is key to sustainability for us. It helps to mitigate milk price volatility and it also means that the business is better able to support two more people.

"It has also allowed Chad and I to change our careers and lifestyle. And it's good to be back on the farm; continuing and reviving a family tradition." |

*Next generation:
young stock at
Hill End Farm*

