

Farm Provides “Working Vacation” For Dogs

By Dawn Throener, Associate Editor

If you like dogs and people, and you're looking for a new business opportunity, you might want to take a look at Ewe-topia in Roy, Wash. It's a farm where city people bring their dogs for “working vacations” by teaching them to herd ducks, sheep and cattle.

Dogs need to feed their instinct to be in control, says Linda Leeman, co-owner. “Herding teaches your dog to be in control with running livestock. The benefits of meeting that need transfer into your everyday life with mailmen, dogs and cats. Over time, with training on stock, you can get your dog to ‘come’ and ‘stay’ with any distraction. It really makes your dog a better pet.”

And the demand for pet services is booming as young childless professionals and baby boom empty nesters have money to spend on their pets. Owners will spend 36 billion dollars on their pets this year according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

Along with Joe Kapelos, Linda spends

her time training dogs and their owners about herding, on top of running the business. Both are also judges in several herding trial programs.

Training dogs is one thing, but the patience and “people” skills to deal with customers is another. Visitors come from all over the U.S. and all walks of life including doctors, lawyers, farriers and massage therapists. “Some of the people who come out here don't listen to you. They have their own agenda,” Linda says. “You have to be pretty persistent, patient and nice.” They all come because they love dogs though. “When people find out this is a great place to come out to, they do.” Some even pitch a tent for a long weekend of herding. Many bring RV's or stay with friends or at a local motel.

Ewe-topia has a dog park and snacks available. She says their place feels like a state park, and requires repairing fences and gates along with general litter cleaning. “When you get 150 people a week coming through, there's a lot of repair and upkeep,” says Linda.



City people say teaching their dogs to herd makes them better pets.

And unlike most herding trainers, Ewe-topia accepts all kinds of dogs, even mixed breeds. “Most people laugh at the fact that we take most any breed. Yet, all dogs have herding instincts.” Some aren't as good at the tasks but, with time, they can get by, she adds.

The couple holds lessons on Tues., Wed., and Thurs. evening and Sat. afternoon lessons for \$11. On Sundays, they have \$8 lessons

starting at 9:30 am. All are on a first come first served basis.

They also sell a story book called “Patience the Herd Dog” for children through age 8. It sells for \$11.95 plus \$3 S&H.

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On-Farm Cheese Plant Turns Milk Into Money

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Mike Gingrich, his partner Dan Patenaude, and their wives knew the milk from their 160-cow grass-fed dairy was an excellent product. They just needed to find a premium market for it. Today, the 2-family partnership sells about 30 percent of their milk as specialty cheese and grosses at least five times what they make selling it as milk.

“I remembered old cheese makers talking about the best milk for cheese was in the spring when cows were first on pasture,” says Gingrich. “With intensive grazing, we are giving cows the equivalent of spring grass throughout much of the season. I thought we might have an opportunity to sell our milk as a specialty product instead of as a commodity product.”

Going from selling milk to selling cheese is not for everyone, nor can it be done overnight. Gingrich started out by researching types of cheese. He then ordered samples and, with the help of friends, they selected a French cheese called Beaufort.

He then turned to the Center for Dairy Research at the University of Wisconsin and to Cedar Grove, a local cheese plant. With their help, he developed “make” procedures or recipes to try and duplicate the Beaufort. He made 8 variations at Cedar Grove, aged them in his basement for about four months and then picked the best tasting one.

At the same time, Gingrich was working at Cedar Grove full time. Wisconsin requires a cheese maker have an 18-month apprenticeship before selling cheese.

In 2000, Uplands Cheese Company (the farm's cheese company name) made 6,000 lbs. of cheese. Gingrich began selling the cheese, which the partners had named Pleasant Ridge Reserve.

“I went to a few farmer's markets and took samples to stores for tasting sessions,” he says. “I figured the best way to learn the market was to get out and work with customers.”

Gingrich was able to dedicate the needed time to making and selling cheese only because his wife and partners were working

with the cows. He admits they had no idea how much time it would take.

“If you haven't marketed a product to the public before, don't underestimate the time it takes to do the selling and customer service,” says Gingrich. “You can have someone else make the cheese and sell it, but then you lose control of quality.”

The cheese is made in rounds and has to be aged in a cave-like environment. Each round is rubbed with salt for two days and then turned by hand and washed with brine at intervals of one to five days. “It takes a lot of hard work to get it to age right,” explains Gingrich.

The partners decided to retail it at around \$20/lb., comparable to similar handcrafted cheeses. This meant finding stores and restaurants with clients who would pay the relatively higher price.

Hard work and good fortune paid off when Gingrich entered a wheel of cheese in the 2001 American Cheese Society Contest (ACSC), one of two major national cheese judging events. Pleasant Ridge Reserve was judged the best cheese. In 2003, the cheese won top honors at the other top national show, the U.S. Cheese Championship. That made Pleasant Ridge Reserve the only cheese to ever capture both titles. This year, it again captured top honors at the ACSC.

Each year for the past five years, Uplands Cheese has expanded production of the cheese to an expected 60,000 lbs. this year. Most of the cheese is made in the spring and the fall. Cheese sales start in October. Cheese unsold by spring is held over and sold as premium 18-month “aged” cheese.

“It is too hot to ship the cheese in the summer by UPS, so we take orders for fall delivery,” explains Gingrich. “I always give past customers for the aged cheese first opportunity, and for the past three years, I haven't taken on a new account. Past customers take all we have.”

With the confidence built from gradual expansion and selling out every year's increased production, the partners made a major investment by building a cheese plant on the farm.



Photo courtesy Graze (www.GrazeOnline.com)

Uplands Cheese Company sells its cheese for about \$20/lb. to stores and restaurants. Most of the 60,000 lbs. they'll produce this year was made last spring to be sold in the fall. Unsold cheese is held over and sold the next spring as premium “aged” cheese.

Instead of hauling milk to Cedar Grove, raw milk is pumped through a pipe from the milk house to the cheese plant across the road. Cheese is only made when cows are on fresh pasture. In early spring and again in the summer when supplemental forage is fed and pasture is growing slower, milk is sold to Cedar Grove.

The largest part of the new 4,000-sq. ft. building is devoted to storage for cheese, which is aged a minimum of four months. The company now hires the equivalent of three full time employees in addition to Gingrich. The new plant required a major investment, but it was designed to reduce labor costs and increase quality.

Today, Uplands sells about 15 percent of its cheese via the internet from the company website. The rest is still sold through stores and restaurants with Gingrich calling pros-

pects and sending out samples.

While he won't share his recipe for his prize-winning cheese, he does have a recipe for success in niche marketing of a farm product.

“Start small and do it yourself until you understand the business, and only then let others take over pieces,” he advises. “The consuming public just loves dealing direct with farmers, knowing where their food comes from and how the animals are treated.”

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