

Raw Milk Cheese Business Works For Small Family Farm

You can taste the difference in Fruitful Seasons Dairy cheese, says Marv Hoffman. The flavor starts with healthy soil and the organic practices on his family's Alexandria, Minn., farm. The seven cheeses the Hoffmans make begin with raw milk from 100 percent grass-fed Jersey cows.

The family is a good example of how it's possible to create a successful business on a small farm. In the six years since they have been licensed to make cheese, Fruitful Seasons Dairy, has developed a following of local customers who come to the farm, or buy their products at farmers markets, health food stores, or online.

Hoffman notes that they didn't jump into the business blindly. He worked as an engineer, and he and his wife, Kathy, grew their own food organically and had one Jersey cow to milk for their own use.

"We feel raw milk is more wholesome because you aren't killing the enzymes, and it's easier to digest for some people," Hoffman says. "Feeding cows only grass is based on the natural ruminant activity of the cow so they are healthier."

Grass-fed milk is also high in omega-3 fats and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a cancer-fighting fat, and the cheese made from the milk has five times more CLA than from

grain-fed cows.

Kathy perfected cheese making and Marv worked with state inspectors to design the system. They follow Minnesota regulations that raw milk cheeses must age at least 60 days.

The Hoffmans and 4 of their 6 children still at home take care of 15 to 16 Jerseys that are rotationally grazed (2 or 3 times a day) on 60 acres of pasture. The family makes cheese twice a week during the growing season and feeds the whey to their pigs and chickens.

Cheese wedges (about 3/4 lb.) are vacuum packed and sell for \$9.50 lb. Uncut wheels (about 10 lbs.) sell for \$8.50 lb. Varieties include Gouda, Tomato-Basil Gouda, Caerphilly, Colby, Brick, Farmhouse Cheddar and Holmes City Spice (onion, garlic and chili pepper Gouda).

"We focus on local marketing," Hoffman says, "to anywhere Spee-Dee Delivery gets in a day like the Twin Cities or northern Iowa."

They can also send orders (with higher shipping costs) to other parts of the country, but Hoffman encourages people to buy local whenever possible.

Many customers come to the farm store to buy cheese and raw milk, which is legal to purchase directly from the farm in Minnesota.

For families considering a similar business,



The 7 cheeses Marv and Kathy Hoffman make begin with raw milk from 100 percent grass-fed Jersey cows. "We think raw milk is more wholesome because you aren't killing the enzymes, and it's easier to digest for some people," says Marv.

Hoffman notes that equipment is expensive and that it's important to contact your state's inspector at the beginning of the process to make sure all regulations are being followed.

The Hoffmans have watched sales increase, but don't want to get too big. Satisfied customers telling others about their products have been the best advertising and helped get their cheese into 5 area stores in addition to the farm store.

Hoffman only works occasionally as an

engineer, and says that thanks to the family's farm operation they don't need to join a fitness club. They don't own a 4-wheeler, and moving cows multiple times a day is as good for the family as it is for the cows.

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Jody Taylor uses a long, swivel-type "muck scoop" to dig fertile muck out of ponds and dump it into a wheelbarrow, which he then hauls to his garden.

"Pivot Fork" Digs Fertile Muck Out Of Ponds

Muck at the bottom of ponds is fertile stuff that works great for improving gardens, says Jody Taylor, Hammond, La., who recently sent FARM SHOW photos of a long, swivel-type "muck scoop" that he made. It lets him use a broad pitchfork to scoop muck out of ponds and dump it into a wheelbarrow, which he then hauls to his garden.

"I first tried using a trash pump to vacuum muck out of ponds, but had only limited success," says Taylor. "My homemade scoop

provides free dirt and good exercise."

The pitchfork is attached to one end of a 21-ft. long pipe, which rides on a small metal roller mounted on a pedestal base. A 4-ft. long T-handle is welded to the other end of the pipe. The operator uses the T-handle to push or pull the pipe, and also to rotate it from side to side.

The roller sets about 4 ft. off the ground and consists of a 10-in. wheel rim mounted on a swivel base. "The pipe rolls easily

on the wheel rim, and the swivel allows lateral movement of the load toward the wheelbarrow," says Taylor.

To fasten the pitchfork, he cut off the fork's round wood handle and fit it tightly into the pipe. Support cables attached to both ends of the pipe keep it from bending under load. Taylor uses a turnbuckle to adjust the cable's suspension as needed.

"The pitchfork works best if there are a lot of sticks and leaves at the bottom of the

pond," says Taylor. "I slid a sock made out of thick, open mesh material over the fork so water can flow through. I use a string or long pole to keep track of where I've already dug. Once the wheelbarrow is full I move it to our garden, where I use a rake to spread the muck out."

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A broad pitchfork attaches to one end of a 21-ft. long pipe. Taylor grabs a 4-ft. long T-handle to push or pull the pipe, and also to rotate it from side to side.



Pipe rides on a small metal roller mounted on a pedestal base.