

Crave Brothers: Turning Forages into Food

As is the case with many farm kids, your destiny is oftentimes preordained. Many run off to college for a few years, earn their degree, and get a job pushing a pencil or doing other tasks for a few years. But for a lot of them, farming is in their blood. It's a calling that may go dormant for a few years, but eventually can't be denied. Such is the case with Jordan Crave.

The history of Crave Brothers Farm goes back to Charles and George Crave who were raised on a 40-cow dairy farm near Beloit, WI. In 1978, they began farming together in Mount Horeb, milking 57 cows on a rented farm. In 1980, they purchased a Waterloo, WI, dairy farm with the goal of building a successful agribusiness. Brothers Tom and Mark later joined. As for Jordan, he graduated from college (UW-Madison Farm and Industry Short Course) in 2006 and worked for a custom harvesting and manure application company for four years. In 2015, he became one of the next generation of owners Crave Brothers Farm with Andy and Patrick Crave.

The family farm has grown since then. Crave Brothers currently farms ~3,000 acres and milks ~1,900 cows that produce ~3½ semi loads of milk/day. A good portion of the milk is dedicated to making Crave Brothers award-winning cheese, processed in their own factory. Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese produces handcrafted fresh mozzarella, mascarpone, Oaxaca, farmer's rope string cheese, and fresh cheddar cheese curds. "We have a newly constructed 60-cow rotary parlor on the home farm and use robotics for the pre- and post-dipping process. The rest of the work is handled by two people in the parlor and one person moving cows and grooming stalls," Jordan added. "We milk three times a day. We also milk three times a day at our satellite dairy. That is 800 cows milked in a double 10 parallel parlor." They strive for minimum combined fat and protein of 7.25 lbs/cow/day.

In order to feed all those cows, they need to raise a lot of forages. They grow corn for silage, corn grain, soybeans, alfalfa, alfalfa-grass mixes, grass hay, winter wheat, triticale, and a variety of cover crops on a wide variety of soil types, mostly silt loam. About a third of their acres are silage, a third are alfalfa, and the rest is split among other crops.

"When it comes to our rotation, it varies by farm, but most of the acres utilized for silage and alfalfa production are 3 years of silage with a cover crop in between followed by winter wheat and then summer-seeded alfalfa with three years of alfalfa production," said Jordan. They generally plant alfalfa in the fall after winter wheat. "We typically incorporate manure and then work the soil smooth and drill the alfalfa in at ~16-18 lbs/ac. Generally, we interseed alfalfa with a meadow/tall fescue blend after the seeding year. It's a good way for us to apply manure to our hay during the growing season and get good utilization of the nitrogen in the manure if we have a grass growing with our alfalfa. It also provides diversity which ultimately improves our soil health," he added. They supplement their alfalfa with manure and potash as needed, generally applied after the first cutting. "I really shy away from pesticides on hay unless absolutely necessary. We scout after every crop for insect pressure and only apply if we exceed an economic threshold. We have not had to spray hay for about three years now."

Once harvested, haylage is put in bunker silos and dry grass hay is baled in large squares and put in a bale shed. "We have a hydroswing mower conditioner to cut grass. We use a tedder to spread it, usually the day after cutting, and work with a neighbor who custom rakes and bales. They use a v-rake to pull it together just ahead of the baler," Jordan said. "They make large rectangular bales with a CLAAS baler. They stack and haul well, so we like the 2'x4'x8' bales they make. We also make round bales on some of the low marshy areas as that baler can move over softer soils much easier than the big square baler." For their haylage, they work with a custom harvester. Cutting is done with triple mowers without conditioners. It's merged with large Oxbo mergers, chopped with large self-propelled choppers, hauled with either large 30' forage trailers or 40' semis, then packed into the bunker with 600-hp articulated tractors. "We usually take 4 cuttings a year with an occasional 5th cutting if we have an extended season and enough storage for it," said Jordan. They rotate alfalfa fields back into corn generally after three years of production.



The Jordan Crave Family: (from L to R) Jordan, Lisette, Jordan's wife Leah, Jedediah, Huxton, and Maverick.

All of this effort goes toward maintaining their two main businesses, Crave Brothers Farm and Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese. “Twenty years ago, my family decided to add value to their milk by processing it themselves. They looked at many options and settled on cheese. We started small and slowly built it to what it is today.” The cheese is so good, in fact, that their version of chocolate mascarpone took first place at the Wisconsin State Fair.

The best management advice Jordan has for his fellow forage farmers is to “check carefully for insect pressure before spraying. If not at threshold, you can potentially be spending a lot of money to put wheel tracks in your hay and get no payback as well as knocking out some beneficial insects in the process.”

In addition to being an MFA member, Crave Brothers Farm is also a member of PDPW, DBA, and local watershed groups including Dodge County Farmers for Healthy Soil and Healthy Water. As to the benefits of being an MFA member, Jordan said, “It’s so valuable to see what other farmers are doing, because no matter what we are doing, there is always a different or better way we could be doing it; we can learn a lot from each other. I am blessed to be able to farm for a living. At times, making feed and doing our best can be stressful and challenging. Just remember, God is good, and he will provide.”