

Innovations and Forward Thinking Have Cave Creek Jerseys Rising to the Top

by Dennis Cosgrove, University of Wisconsin

Cave Creek Jerseys is a 60-acre farm nestled in the rolling hills of Pierce County in west-central Wisconsin. Michelle Wiegart and Leroy Clark have farmed this land since 1990. The farm, originally established with 13 cows brought from Maine, has since expanded to 38 cows. Cows are rotationally grazed from May-October; all other feeds are purchased. Leroy manages the cattle and pastures while Michelle, PhD from Cornell, handles the nutrition and herd health programs. They have developed a herd rolling average of 18000 lbs with 5.7% butterfat and 3.52% protein. Butterfat and protein are important as the farm also houses a mini-dairy plant. For the past 3 years they have produced CC's Jersey Creme Yogurt which is marketed locally, as well as in Minneapolis, Madison, Boston and California. "In order to make a living milking cows we felt we had to expand our herd or do something such as direct marketing or producing a value-added product. We chose the latter," says Leroy. They do it well according to the American Cheese Society which awarded CC's Jersey Crème Yogurt "Best in Class" at their 2004 annual competition in Milwaukee.

Feeding/Calving Strategies. Unlike many dairy grazers who spring calve to take advantage of lush pasture growth, most of the Cave Creek cows freshen in the fall allowing them to receive a high producing ration during peak lactation over winter. When production slows, cows are turned out to pasture minimizing the impact on milk production from lower dry matter intake associated with grazing. In winter, Michelle pays close attention to commodity prices and balances a ration that provides high production and high milk fat at the lowest price. Grain and protein are purchased at local mills carrying a wide variety of products. In addition to corn, wheat midds and barley are also utilized. Corn silage, provided by neighboring farmers that fill their 18 x 60 silo, is used in winter rations. They purchase high quality western hay for the milk cows. Grassy hay is purchased locally for the heifers and dry cows. This feeding strategy has paid off as they have been recognized as one of the highest producing Jersey herds in the U.S., frequently ranking in the top 10 for their herd size.

The summer ration is more difficult due to the changing nature of the pastures and the difficulty in knowing how much dry matter cows are consuming. "In our early years I estimated pasture dry matter intake indirectly, assuming cows would eat 4% of their body weight daily. I sampled pastures for quality, and then formulated our concentrate mix accordingly. After 14 years, I now directly measure the amount of dry matter the cows are eating before they go out on pasture. I then assume pastures provide 50-55% of that, test the pastures and formulate our concentrate accordingly. We typically feed 1 pound of grain for each 3-4 pounds of milk being produced." Some dry hay is available to the animals in the summer, particularly if it is hot and they are not grazing as aggressively.

One problem with the fall calving strategy is that most cows are tailending or dry during the mid-summer months. This is good from a feeding standpoint but is a problem in the yogurt plant. Having reduced milk production in summer means less yogurt can be produced. Currently 50% of the milk is used in making yogurt; the goal is to increase this to 100%. To ensure a steady year-round supply of milk Cave Creek is gradually switching to year-round calving. However, this comes at a price as cows at peak lactation in spring and summer produce less milk than their counterparts that peak in winter on stored feed. In addition, milk fat drops from 5% to 4% when cows switch from stored feed to pasture. A possible solution is to feed cows in confinement year-round. However, Leroy is unwilling to make this change, as pasturing cows is a cheaper way to feed them and an easier way to manage them. In addition, he sees a marketing advantage to grazing the cows. "Our customers definitely like the fact that our cows are grazing and are not a confined herd."

Pasture management. Cave Creek pastures are mainly bluegrass with some brome grass, timothy, birdsfoot trefoil, and white clover. Thirty acres are divided into 12 paddocks ranging 2-5 acres each. The milking herd gets ~1 acre of new pasture each morning. Leroy follows a take half/leave half strategy leaving the pasture with plenty of leaf area when the milk cows are done grazing. He has three 10-acre pastures for the heifers and dry cows meaning a following herd does not graze his milk cow pastures. This allows for quick pasture recovery and results in thick, dense pastures maximizing dry matter intake. The heifer pastures are typically grazed more closely than those grazed by the milking herd.

Leroy clips each pasture at least once a year, usually late June after heading is complete, ridding the paddocks of old seedheads and allowing more even grazing throughout the year. He has used Roundup and no-till seeding to renovate a couple of pastures. He has attempted to introduce new species through frost seeding with mixed success. No fertilizer is used except the cow manure.

Cattle Breeding. Their breeding management strategy is to breed unique, pedigreed cattle with longevity, managing them to achieve that longevity. "We try to manage for profitable high production of protein and butterfat. We use out-cross or uniquely pedigreed sires extensively. To further diversify the genetic background of our herd, we have used a number of bulls from Denmark and New Zealand over the past 8 years. We have benefited from our breeding decisions, and believe the cattle families we have developed will benefit the entire Jersey Breed as it faces the challenges that extensive inbreeding has brought."

The Future. Leroy and Michelle hope to increase product demand to the point that all of their milk is being marketed through their yogurt plant. They may also expand their product line to include things such as cream. Both have commented that the time spent on marketing is something they had not anticipated. This is an area where they would like to spend less time, as they, like most dairy producers, would like to spend more time with the cows.