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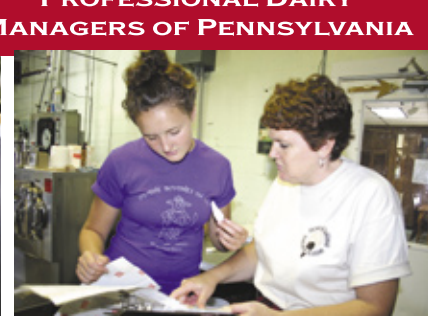
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Photos from left: 1) Lolly Lesher and daughter Olivia with one of her big sister Jaylene's Jerseys: Miracle. The Way-Har Farms 100-cow herd is made up of multiple breeds.



2) Lolly hand mixes chocolate caramel ice cream after making 11 batches of chocolate for the milkshake wagon they'll have at the upcoming fairs.



3) Lolly and daughter Jaylene count ice cream inventory. 4) Jaylene and Olivia with Jaylene's Pronto heifer born the day before. Her dam is a Gibson daughter named Purchase.



5) Laura (left) and Jaylene enjoy taking care of the cows and heifers. They are pictured here with sister Olivia, herding dog 'Blue' and their show string of heifers. Photos by Sherry Bunting

Member profile

Ice cream adds new dimension to family's farm-retail tradition

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

BERNVILLE, Pa.—When the small milk pasteurizing and jugging plant was built at Way-Har Farms here in Berks County in 1970, the salesman who sold the equipment to brothers Wayne and Harold Leshar put in 400 plants just like it on dairy farms throughout Pennsylvania. Today, there are less than 30 remaining.

Times have changed.

While Wayne and his wife Shirley are still involved in the business, their son William and his wife Lolly today operate the 100-cow dairy farm, milk processing facility, and farmers-market-style store—with the help of their four children Joshua, 17, Jaylene, 15, Laura, 13, and Olivia, 7.

"William's parents are a wonderful help in running the store," says Lolly. Wayne delivers milk, ice cream, bottled drinks and orange juice to local restaurants. He also bottles the milk. The family is quick to point out they have terrific employees at the store and on the farm.

They've learned to roll with the punches: the endless array of new regulations, and the growing number of audits and inspections they are accountable for. Producer-handlers who process and retail their own dairy products are accountable to 11 inspectors (weights and measures, USDA, PDA, milk sanitation, public food and health, to name a few).

They file paperwork regularly with the Federal Milk Market Administrator and the PA Milk Marketing Board. They pay into the national and state dairy promotion checkoff. They have employee withholding, just like any business, and pay state sales tax on a quarterly basis. They carry liability insurance, implement food safety protocols, and assume all financial risk for their products from cow to consumer.

"The regulatory aspect doesn't end. I spend days and days keeping track of the paper trail," says Lolly. While the cows are the passion of her husband and daughters, and tractors and the mechanical side appeal to her son Josh, Lolly thoroughly enjoys the retail side.

"It's a whole different realm from the farm," says Lolly, who has a degree in economics and grew up on a fruit farm milking a few cows by hand for her mother's butter route.

She gets a lot of questions from shoppers about dairy farming practices and people wanting to know if the milk is "organic."

"Our attitude has always been that milk is milk," says Lolly. "We try to educate our consumers with honesty and without putting down anyone else." A video from the Center for Dairy Excellence (CDE) Discover Dairy curriculum plays on a screen by the dairy case. Some of the footage was filmed at Way-Har Farms.

But for all the hard work involved in farming, processing and retailing, the Leshers enjoy keeping up this cow-to-consumer tradition. In fact, during Farm Show week in January, they added a new dairy venture: making their own ice cream under the Way-Har label sold in their store and to area restaurants.

In addition to their own pasteurized whole milk, 2%, nonfat and cream, the Leshers have long sold chocolate milk and seasonal dairy beverages like fresh strawberry milk and egg nog. They also sell cottage cheese, sour cream and buttermilk. And they have had a bakery department since the early 1990s. The farm store



The Way-Har Farms Store sits above the farm along busy Rte 183 near Bernville, PA. On this night, like many, it's where the Leshar family—William and Lolly and children Josh, Jaylene (right), Laura (middle) and Olivia—gathers after finishing chores for a late dinner and, of course, ice cream. In the background are freezers stocked with ice cream made here.

also features local produce and other goods from local 'mom and pop' businesses.

While they have always sold ice cream at the store, they did not start making their own until the Reading Creamery closed its doors in December last year. At that time, they were developing a business plan for their farm using a template available through the CDE.

The business plan pointed them in the direction of this natural fit. After all, they had already been juggling pasteurized milk for decades. Why not add their own brand of ice cream made right here at the store?

The response from customers has been very positive. Retail sales, overall, are down in today's economy. But even though the counter sales of ice cream started slowly this year with the cool spring and summer temperatures, the Leshers are seeing half-gallon sales flourish with vanilla ice cream doubling every two weeks. The Kutztown Folk Festival earlier this month sold 400 gallons of Way-Har ice cream in 10 days. And the Way-Har milkshake wagon not only goes to area fairs and festivals, it is also used almost every weekend by organizations for local carnivals and fund raisers.

In seven short months, they've come up with 40 flavors for their Way-Har ice cream: Some are seasonal (like egg nog), some are new creations (like chocolate rainforest—a chocolate base with caramel, cashews and chocolate chips swirled in), and others are hard-to-find traditional favorites, like teaberry.

"I really like making the ice cream, but it is a lot of work and very physical," says Lolly as she busily taps chocolate ice cream into containers and swirls in ingredients such as marshmallow and caramel while Jaylene levels off and labels the containers and carts them to the freezer. The ice cream mix is Lolly's own recipe after experimenting and giving samples to friends and family for feedback.

"The ice cream is a nice addition to the business and offers a way for us to control our own destiny," she says. "Nobody wants to make flavors like teaberry or orange-pineapple anymore. But people still like those old fashioned flavors. We sell an awful lot of teaberry."

Making the ice cream is just one of Lolly's domains in the family business, and she's particularly proud of the Way-Har vanilla and chocolate. "That's how you know it's good ice cream, when the basics have great flavor," she says, noting that, "There is an awful lot of handwork involved, but that's what makes the ice cream good."

Way-Har Farms has two delivery trucks on the road delivering milk, cream, ice cream and orange juice to 70 restaurants and a few local hotels that serve a continental breakfast.

Not only have they added ice cream making to their tasks in the business, they also went from milking twice a day to milking every 9.5 hours, which means the cows are essentially milked five times every two days.

"In January we saw the milk price coming down and we looked for ways to help maintain cash-flow," William explains. "We saw a boost right away of five to six pounds per cow."

The herd average stands at about 67 pounds/cow/day. The herd is a grazing herd receiving 20% of their diet from pasture. Of the 350 acres the Leshers farm, 90 are dedicated to grazing a mix of rye in the spring and orchard grass, clover and some alfalfa the rest of the season.

"We also do a fall planting of oats after corn silage to have grazing into the winter," William adds. "That's what is neat about grazing."

The calm of grazing cows in the pastures provides a simple balance to the constant motion of this diversified family farm lifestyle.

Everyone takes a turn with the milking, and they have a full-time employee who has been with them eight years as well as an elementary school teacher who helps with evenings and weekends. What's nice about the new milking schedule is that the night milking only happens every other Friday. During July, the cows were milked 2x on the even days and 3x on the odd days. In August, it will flip.

"Once we got used to it, we found it's really more flexible," Lolly reports.

Next week, they will need all the flexibility they can get. Human resources will be surely tested as everyone heads for the Reading Fair. Not only will the children show 11 dairy ani-

mals between them, Josh will also show his 4-H pigs and Jaylene has a market steer. They'll also take shifts helping their parents run the Way-Har Farms milkshake wagon and still get back and forth to the farm to do chores.

One of their milking employees has cows in the herd that she'll be showing at the fair, and the store bakery manager has children in 4-H showing livestock. This week was the relative calm before the storm as Lolly and Jaylene were found Saturday morning making 11 batches of chocolate ice cream to fill regular orders, keep the store stocked, and get ready for the cones and shakes they'll serve at the fair.

In the evening, after the milking, William was out fixing waterlines in the heifer pasture. Josh was scraping the barn, and thinking about getting ready for the tractor pull at the Lebanon Fair (a hobby of his). Laura and Jaylene were finishing chores and planning to get their show heifers ready after a late dinner with Mom and Dad at the store. Younger sister Olivia was happy to narrate my tour of their farm, and she was full of dairy facts and descriptions.

There are many irons in the fire here at Way-Har Farms, but the family takes it all in stride. They have learned to 'think outside of the box.' In addition to the demands of the business, Lolly works for the All-American Dairy Show in Harrisburg, serves on the CDE steering committee, and has made seven trips to the Capitol in the past six months talking to legislators about issues facing dairy farmers.

The family is active in breed associations, having registered Holsteins, Jerseys, Ayrshires, Brown Swiss and Milking Shorthorns. The children have their own cows and are involved in 4-H. Josh has Brown Swiss, Laura has Milking Shorthorns and Jaylene has mostly Jerseys. Plus they each have a Holstein heifer from the family's Gibson daughter "Purchase."

Josh helps with field work and does equipment maintenance on the farm. Laura and Jaylene take care of the heifers and help their Dad with herd management and breeding records.

While they are enthusiastic about rotational grazing, they don't use grazing genetics. "We focus on type," says William, "We breed for good udders and feet and legs. We want cows that will last." The farm has a low culling rate, but with the low milk price, they culled heavily in the past three months.

The Leshers are members of the Grange and the Keystone Ice Cream Association, and they are long-time members of the Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP).

"I don't think most people understand what PDMP does for every dairy producer in the state. They are a voice ready to speak up for dairy farmers," Lolly observes. "This is one of the organizations we support because they do so much for all of us. Every time PDMP steps to the plate to provide an educational program or to visit the legislature, we all benefit."

As the summer wanes just in time for the All-American Dairy Show in September, the seasonal market for ice cream will wane as well. Come Labor Day, they will lose 60% of their ice cream business.

The Leshers are hoping their investment of time and money in making their own ice cream will pay off. "There is a lot to doing this. It's not easy, but it is rewarding," says Lolly. "We're just like any other farm family out here trying to make a go of it."