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Hatchland Dairy Quality is the focus here, and good 'ole fashioned ingenuity

 By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

NORTH HAVERHILL, N. Hamp.—The sign on the parlor door says: “We produce wicked good milk for Hatchland Dairy.” And the attitude here from top to bottom is consistent with the farm’s mission: “To produce, process and sell the highest quality dairy products.”

Hatchland Dairy was 62 years in the making, but the dream was “hatched” even earlier.

Howard Hatch grew up in a family that did not own a farm, but worked on farms. He learned to milk by hand at age five.

Sometimes he would deliver milk and eggs from two cows and 10 hens on his way to school. And at the age of 13, he raised his first calf. That was more than 60 years ago.

While he was serving our country in Vietnam, he decided: “If I get home safely, I wanted to try milking my own cows.”

He started a small dairy herd in 1958, and today, the Hatch family has around 450 cows and a milk bottling plant to process some of their own milk.

During the PDMP tour to Vermont in March, the last morning was spent in North Haverhill, New Hampshire where the Hatchland Dairy bottling plant and dairy farm are both located. It was both an inspiration and a learning experience for tour-goers.

The herd consists of 441 cows, 241 heifers and two bulls, mainly Holstein, with some Jersey influence as one-third of the herd are cross-breds. They have a calving interval of 12.7 months and somatic cell counts are 150,000. And they do all of their own crop work.

They bottled a little over one million pounds per month of last year’s production, with half going to home-delivery routes in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and the other half to local stores.

“It’s a huge investment when you total up the barn expenses, including the shop, and the cost to bottle and truck the milk,” said Dennis Ward, who had his own herd of Jersey cows before coming to Hatchland. “We process milk five days a week and half of the milk is bottled in glass.”

The bottling really started with a small jugging operation in a section of a truck garage in 1992. By 2004, they had invested in a small processing plant at the farm, and today, Howard’s children—Preston Hatch and Kristen May—are involved in day to day operations and as partners in the business, which employs 23 people.

“The building here is our own design,” said Preston about the dairy plant at the farm, which replaced the nearby plant they had outgrown.

They use vat pasteurizers that hold the milk at a lower heat for a longer time because this helps preserve the natural flavor of milk, resulting in a higher quality product compared with rapid high heat pasteurization, according to Preston.



Preston Hatch (above) talks about his family’s farm in New Hampshire. A little over half of the milk is bottled in plastic (left) for sale to local stores, and the other half is bottled in glass (bottom) for home delivery routes in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. The 450-cow dairy herd is housed in one building, but comes to the reconstructed steel building pictured here (left center) to eat. This area is exclusively for dining and the barn behind it is for lounging. Cows are free to walk between the two, which the owners and manager say has some real management advantages. Mainly this type of expansion was a more efficient way to expand their housing. Photos by Sherry Bunting

“Our job costs are higher in labor to do it this way, but we are committed to the highest quality milk,” he said, adding that they have done chocolate milk for quite a while, and have recently added strawberry milk, and they do eggnog. They have also started making a hard ice cream mix because they have learned there is a demand for it in the north country.

Preston encouraged dairy producers to think and plan before getting into the bottling business. “We built the plant and started the bottling, and then found the market, which was probably the wrong order of things,” he said. “It’s a heavy investment (even when shopping for used equipment). In the beginning it was tough. We bottled only two days a week and took Class IV price on the balance.”

Today, they bottle five days a week and are receiving the Class III price on the balance.

“We purchased everything used or rebuilt, which is a continual process of hunt-and-find,” said Preston, citing what they paid for some of the equipment versus what the cost would be new. “And we try to do just about everything we can, with our own labor here.”

“The most important thing is you have to have a good, qualified electrician, plumber, and refrigeration guy close by that you can rely on,” he stressed. “You will need him at times in the middle of the night.”

The milk that goes to a distributor doing home delivery in Boston travels three hours one way. “We’ll load the truck today and at 1:00 a.m., it’ll go to Boston. That’s 175 miles,” he said. Hatchland has its own trucking company. Preston used to do the runs, but now his brother-in-law David May makes the trips.

“We don’t do a lot of advertising,” Preston acknowledged. “But we are attracting sales and also visitors to the farm, based on the quality of our milk. We’re constantly growing, but we are limited as to how much milk we can bottle here in one day’s time because of using the longer pasteurization process.”

This is one of the reasons they are looking at adding other processes. In addition to the ice cream mix they just started making, they would like to do their own cheese and butter.

And you guessed it: Preston and his father have already been “shopping.”

“We have butter churns in storage,” he said. “There is a market out there for really good butter. Dad is the butter expert, so that’s his baby.”