

Farmer Profile

Lori Sollenberger - Hidden Hills Dairy/Jerseys

Among the rolling hills of Bedford County you will find the family farm of Lori Sollenberger. Lori grew up on her family farm, and returned to form a farming partnership with her brother and parents after she earned a dairy science degree from Penn State in 1981.

Lori's family developed a herd of Jersey cows that were nationally recognized for high production and superior genetics. "Jerseys have called this farm home since 1955," Lori mentioned.

"Our first attempt at cheesemaking was back in 2000 when we bought a Pladot system, an Israeli-produced dairy system, which offered training and design of a cheese facility. It unfortunately didn't really work for us and the market for the fresh cheeses we were producing didn't exist in this area," Lori continued.

In 2005 there were a lot of changes on the farm, the main barn was destroyed after the original structure and the addition separated causing a floor to collapse. "It was also a very dry year," mentioned Lori, "so we were already feeding hay early in the season." So to recoup some percentage of the losses, the herd was dispersed at public auction.

"Today I milk 8-10 cows instead of 50," remarked Lori. "From April through October, our cows enjoy the wide open spaces and superb nutrition made possible by intensive grazing. During the winter months, the ration is based on our own homegrown grass and alfalfa hay. We do not feed any fermented feeds or use rBST. The quality of our cheese begins with quality milk from contented, stress free cows."

With 225 acres at Hidden Hills, there is no flat acreage, "I thought it was important to keep the rolling hills on the farm covered, so we aren't growing any row crops, instead it is all planted in hay for the Jerseys and to earn additional income," she said. "I will admit I still have a lot to learn about pasturing, and we are not certified organic. I do use some sprays on the forages. But I am a big advocate that agriculture in general needs to be more aware of how much is being used and limit use of chemicals."

The same care and attention that, for years, went into developing the cow genetics is now focused on making quality cheese. With the milk from eight cows, Lori and husband Rex Knepp are making fine cheeses in an on farm facility licensed and inspected by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA).

Lori generally only uses 45% of the milk the Jersey herd produces for cheese, so instead of dumping the rest, she is experimenting with raising veal calves and is

considering custom calf-raising, since the left over milk quantity isn't enough for a co-op to pick up.

“Currently, all of our cheeses are made with raw milk. As such we are required to age them for a minimum of sixty days. (Research has determined that cheeses aged for 60 days will not contain harmful pathogens.) Our milk is tested routinely and meets all of the standards set for licensing requirements. Small batches and careful processing create a flavorful cheese that we can offer with pride,” said Lori.

“Producing raw milk cheeses is just simpler,” said Lori. “It is great to skip a step [pasteurization] and I think we end up with a better tasting product. I am learning more about all the opinions out there about raw milk and we think this may be another niche market for us. We recently qualified for a raw milk permit to sell fluid milk. Our inspector from PDA has been good, and we keep that relationship on good terms by keeping things extremely clean and following the guidelines.”

“We currently sell our cheeses at a farmers’ market in Somerset; in addition to mail order from individuals and restaurants; local grocery and natural food stores; a distributor in the Baltimore, Maryland area that sells to restaurants; and Penns Corner Farm Alliance,” Lori commented.

A favorite cheese at the farmers’ market includes the Allegheny, which is based on a recipe for an Italian style cheese traditionally made in the summer in the plateau region of the Dolomites. Hidden Hills’ version is adapted to their wintertime whole milk in the rolling foothills of the Alleghenies. Others include the Havarti-style Ivory Lace; Boltonfeta, a Greek-style feta (which won a bronze medal at the 2008 World Jersey Cheese Awards); Gouda Gold; Old Gold; Temptation, a smooth, creamy cheese recommended to be enjoyed with a gingersnap; and Tye, a Romano style cheese.

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Interview with Lori Sollenberger

What is unique about your farm?

Actually it doesn't feel as though we are very unique among the PASA circles! I don't think of things we do that are different or inspiring, probably because so many of the things we do came from hearing about other PASA members. We are unique among neighborhood farms in that we grow only hay (no row crops) and sell value added products. We likely have the smallest dairy herd in several counties and are the only cheesemaker in Bedford County.

How has your operation evolved?

Until 2005 the farm was a typical small-scale commercial dairy farm raising corn and hay and breeding nationally recognized, high indexing registered Jerseys - while leaning towards the fringes of sustainable agriculture. The farm has been in continuous no-till since the 70's and we began pasturing in the early 90's. We tried cheesemaking in 2000 but, for a variety of reasons, that venture failed. Then in 2005 several things happened the necessitated selling the herd and it seemed like an opportune time to try cheeses again on a very small scale. Since then we have converted the entire acreage to hay production and have also begun to experiment with raising veal calves. Marketing continues to be our greatest challenge and the goal is still to find a combination of products that will make the farm profitable.

Why did you join PASA?

I joined PASA for very pragmatic reasons - I wanted to attend the conference and it simply made sense to join! But I have stayed because of the wealth of information, support, networking and friendships that come with the territory.

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?
I think the whole umbrella of economics is the most critical issue facing agriculture today. Too many farms of all types are looking at red ink. We need to find ways to make farming profitable that go beyond niche markets and specialty foods. It's easy to see that industrialized agriculture is not sustainable, but we need to also develop viable alternatives that will recognize the need for affordable food in mainstream markets along with protecting our health and environment and providing a reasonable income for our farmers.