



Recipe for success

Local food movement has on-farm dairy processors confident about future of their businesses



den Haan



Miller



Ysselstein

Anyone who wants confirmation of the local food movement need only talk to Bonnie den Haan, John Miller or Shep Ysselstein. All three consider the movement fundamental to their decisions to establish on-farm dairy processing businesses.

As more and more people in their Simcoe County community near Alliston asked about buying fresh milk from their farm, den Haan and her husband, John, became convinced there is a market for non-homogenized whole milk.

Ten years ago, before the local food movement took off, Miller would not have considered processing the milk from his Jersey operation near Creemore, Ont. Now, when he goes to town, people ask him how soon they will be able to buy his milk. “They don’t even ask the price,” he said.

When Ysselstein held the grand opening for his Gunn’s Hill Artisan

Cheese on a cool, wet day last October, the local food movement was especially evident. Some 2,000 people showed up to support his new plant and retail outlet just south of Woodstock, Ont.

The den Haans took a hard look at setting up their own plant in April 2010 after hearing DFO was looking for producers wanting to become on-farm fluid processors. They participated in a tour organized by DFO, visiting on-farm plants in Canada and the U.S. Their decision made to go ahead, they set their goals.

The planning stage for their new enterprise took a long time, den Haan said. Among the key decisions was locating the processing facility to comply with federal as well as provincial regulations.

Last August, shovels went into the ground and by mid-January construction was well underway. The building is highly specialized and has to meet

strict food safety regulations, den Haan said.

As well as the processing facility, it will include a retail outlet. The den Haans have also been talking to local distributors and retailers about selling their products—fluid milk in one-litre, two-L and 500-mL sizes, and Greek-style yogurt.

They have been using social media extensively in their marketing. As well as their website, they have Facebook and Twitter accounts, and have uploaded video to YouTube.

The tally for the new building, equipment, driveway, and marketing and consulting is \$800,000. Before

Dairy Farmers of Ontario and CanWest DHI held their annual general meetings recently at the Fairmont Royal York in Toronto. Editor Bill Dimmick files these reports.



initiating any new business venture, ensure it is financially sound, den Haan advised.

Miller's family has history in dairy processing and he has long wanted to get into the business. He and his wife, Marie, plan to put fresh pasteurized Jersey milk in quart and half-gallon glass bottles with the Miller's Dairy label.

Another motivation to go ahead with enterprise has been their 20-year-old son's interest in the family business, Miller said. Given the current quota situation, small-scale processing offers them the opportunity to expand.

On the DFO-organized tour of on-farm processing plants, one in particular caught their eye. Mapleline Dairy in Massachusetts had an operation they saw as a model. Owner Paul Kokoski, who also milks Jerseys, has been mentoring their project.

They broke ground for their new processing plant last August, placing a small notice in a local newspaper the week before. More than 150 showed up. "I was overwhelmed by the support and enthusiasm on a Wednesday

morning with just one week's notice," Miller said.

They got provincial approval only for their processing facility. That will let them pump milk directly from barn to plant. Federal approval would have required locating the new facility too far away, he explained.

He and Marie have no plans for an on-farm retail outlet. They have purchased a delivery truck and are targeting mom-and-pop retailers in the Barrie, Wasaga Beach and Collingwood areas around Creemore to sell their milk. As well, some major grocery chain store managers have the latitude to buy local, he said. Their aim is eventually selling all 60,000 litres the herd produces monthly through local distribution channels.

Ysselstein uses only a portion of the milk produced by his family's 120-head milking herd to make 60,000 kilograms of Swiss-style cheeses each year. While the 29-year-old grew up on his parents' farm and milked cows for awhile, he developed a passion for making cheese.

His Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese is closely connected with the Oxford

County family farm but operates as a separate business. Ysselstein learned his craft in the U.S., British Columbia and Switzerland.

So far, he sells cheese only from his own store where he makes it. He wants to develop his products further before pushing for broader distribution.

Ysselstein currently makes three unique cheeses in small batches using traditional techniques: Gunn's Hill Hard, Semi-Hard, and Soft. All three have definite Swiss influences.

As well as selling cheese, he has built consumer education into his business. He shows customers how cows are fed and cared for, and how he makes cheese from their milk. These elements enhance the customer's trip to his store to make the experience worthwhile, he said.

He encourages group and school tours, expecting about one tour every week, and even offers a "cheesemaker for a day" program.

Consumers wanting to know more about their food sources has helped fuel his business. "The interest in local food has been great for me," Ysselstein said.

Blue cow gaining traction with ice cream consumers

The 100% Canadian Milk symbol campaign, featuring the little blue cow, is gaining traction and consumers are now looking for it, the vice-president of a major ice cream processor told delegates.

"It is working," said Ashley Chapman, whose parents founded Chapman's Ice Cream in an old creamery in 1973. The company now uses three million kilograms of butterfat annually in its products, which display the little blue cow logo.

Based in Markdale, Ont., Chapman's receives hundreds of letters per week from consumers loyal to real ice cream. They also complain routinely about frozen desserts, he said.

Frozen desserts began appearing in grocery freezers after the Ontario government was forced to appeal the *Edible Oils Act* and modify the *Milk Act*, Chapman noted. He estimated the dairy industry may have lost markets for up to six million kg of butterfat since then.

Frozen dessert products, made by two multinational companies, are packaged to look like ice cream and are placed in grocery freezers beside ice cream. However, they contain vegetable or coconut oil instead of butterfat.

The words "frozen dessert" tend to be in small type on labels and hard to read. Labels may also use terms such as "all natural flavours and colours" or "new creamy taste." This confuses consumers, Chapman said.

Despite the confusing packaging and labels, consumers may be catching on, he added. Data from AC Nielsen, a company that tracks product sales in supermarkets, show frozen dessert sales dropped two per cent in 2010 and 11 per cent in 2011.

Still, Chapman warned, new frozen dessert formulations are steadily improving, posing a threat to ice cream.

For now, though, Chapman's remains committed to making only real ice cream with real dairy ingredients, he said.



Chapman: frozen desserts pose threat.