

## Goat Dairies Go Big In Wisconsin

Wisconsin has long claimed to be the Dairy State, and that's increasingly true for goat dairies, too. At 74,000 head, the state leads the nation in the number of dairy goats, nearly twice that of second-ranked California. Multiple dairies housing and milking goats by the thousands have opened in recent years. At the same time, smaller operations are expanding in number and productivity.

"The unique thing with goats is there are a lot of niche markets," says Ashley Scheel, A-K Acres. "I have friends who milk dairy goats for their own use and friends with commercial dairies that milk from 100 head to 1,000 plus goats on their family farms."

Scheel represents one of the niches, as she and her husband Kyle specialize in high-quality Toggenburg dairy goats. They have shipped breeding stock as far as the Philippines, Puerto Rico and across the U.S. "Demand is driving quality," says Scheel. "Even herds like ours, who don't ship commercially, utilize milk testing, linear appraisal (equivalent to cattle classification), and exhibiting from local to national levels. This drives the demand for higher quality genetics."

Goat genetics are a big part of Scheel's life. Currently the president of the Wisconsin



**Drumlin Dairy with 7,000 head, milks twice daily on a 120-stall rotary.**

Dairy Goat Association, she has been a licensed goat with the American Dairy Goat Association since she was 18.

She notes that many dairy goat producers start out buying a couple of goats for home consumption. Some expand into niche markets making cheese, soaps, lotions and more. Others expand into commercial milk production, selling to goat cheese plants in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois, like Saputo, Kolb-Lena or LaClare.

LaClare Creamery started in the 1970's

when the founders bought a small hobby farm with two goats. The herd slowly expanded to more than 400, as did their cheesemaking. Today, LaClare's 25 hard and soft goat cheese brands are 100 percent domestically produced. The company recently merged with a large goat dairy established to supply LaClare with milk. It now includes several herds in the 6,000 to 8,000-head size.

"When these larger dairies pop up, it increases demand for seed stock from smaller producers between 25 and 75 head," says Scheel.

Several things have changed as dairy goats have become big business, notes Scheel. One is the emphasis on genetics, in particular production, either in volume or in components.

"We used to think a decent lactation was around 6 to 8 lbs. a day or 2,500 lbs. a year," she says. "Today, we have goats producing upwards of 4,000 lbs. a year."

What genetics producers seek out depends on how they are paid. "In some areas of the country, they're paid more for components such as protein and butterfat," says Scheel.

Emphasis on herd health has been driven in part by the larger goat dairies. "They can't buy all the goats they need in one place, so they're careful about the goats they buy," says Scheel. "This means sourcing goats from herds with attention to detail on health

testing and raised on strict protocols to reduce any risk."

Growth in demand for higher quality animals has also increased their value. Scheel notes that even a kid from a good family milker with decent genetics can sell for \$300, twice its price 10 years ago. Higher quality animals have increased similarly. Kids from many breeds sell for \$800 up to \$2,000 when only a few weeks old.

"A good seed stock type animal will bring from \$600 to \$1,200," says Scheel. "Miniature breeds like the Nigerian Dwarf are another phenomenon. They've sold for upwards of \$20,000."

Although Nigerians produce less milk per lactation than full-size breeds, they are very valuable for cheesemaking.

She and her husband don't sell their milk; they bottle feed it to the babies to protect the udder health of their breeding stock.

Scheel suggests FARM SHOW readers interested in learning more about dairy goats visit the Wisconsin State Fair. "We've had 1,200 head showing at the fair," says Scheel. "It competes in numbers with some of the national shows."

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## Indiana Farm Finds Profit With Popcorn

One farm in Northwest Indiana has transitioned from growing feed corn to feeding moviegoers with premium popcorn.

Current owner Harvey Gutwein's great-grandfather used the 9,000-acre property to grow corn for milling into cornmeal starting in 1906. The property switched to seed corn in 1936.

In 1998, Gutwein experimented by planting several hundred acres of popcorn. As other family members dropped out of farming, Gutwein was able to expand his popcorn production.

The farm currently produces about 50 million pounds of popcorn each year. Most is distributed wholesale to packers that sell it under a variety of brand names across the United States and Asia. Some is used by local movie theatres as well as high school

and professional sports teams, including the Indianapolis Colts. What's left is sold under the Gutwein Popcorn brand name online as well as in regional retail locations.

The farm specializes in three types of popcorn - butterfly, mushroom, and standard white. Butterfly kernels form "wings" when popped and is a popular choice for microwave popcorn, while mushroom kernels form the classic caramel corn rounded shape.

After harvest, the kernels are run through a processing plant to remove dirt and debris before going into storage.

All popcorn kernels must be stored where they can maintain about 14 percent moisture. It's the pressure buildup from steam within the kernels that eventually causes them to pop. If they dry out, they likely won't pop.

The farm relies on moisture sensors on its

grain bins to maintain kernel quality. The bin sensors activate fans that either bring in or take out moisture based on ambient conditions. Care is taken to keep the kernels from scratching, as this creates an exit point for the steam and prevents popping.

At present, the farm is managed primarily by family members. The work itself is fairly automated. Within the packing space, the farm uses an automatic bagger and a robot to stack all the popcorn after bagging.

Connect with Gutwein popcorn for wholesale orders or to purchase products to try at home through the company website.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Gutwein Popcorn, 3215 S 1450 W, Francesville, Ind. 47946 (ph 800-488-9346; www.gutwein-popcorn.mybigcommerce.com).



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**Central State University in Ohio offers Building Small Farm Viability and FastTrack Farming programs through its extension office to expand farming in Ohio.**

## Extension Programs Support New Farmers

Ohio's Central State University's extension office offers two free programs to support new farmers: the Building Small Farm Viability Training and the FastTrack Farming Project.

Its goal is to support the creation of sustainable farms and enable farmers to maintain a good quality of life.

The Viability Training program serves those who have started a farm within the past 3 to 10 years and want additional training to grow bigger or become more successful. It educates participants on ways to have a successful farm from multiple

angles, including production, marketing, and business planning. Topics include how to obtain farmland or manage an heirs' property, selling in retail markets, grocery stores, and other venues, and the specifics of managing the business side of farming.

FastTrack Farming is a similar program offered by the university. The 12-month training aims to improve farming opportunities for underrepresented populations and military veterans. It's meant for those who have never managed a farm or have done so for fewer than ten years. The goal is to build relationships between beginning farmers and

agricultural organizations that can teach them applicable skills. These include management techniques, farming skills, and financial literacy.

Program participants receive both remote and hands-on training experiences. These include workshops for growing organic produce, managing hydroponic and aquaponic systems, and learning the basics of beekeeping. Participants gain access to technical assistance for finding farmland, applying for USDA grants, and navigating the world of cost-sharing and loan procurement.

Student farmers attend workshops and

training conferences and have opportunities to network with other farmers. Likewise, incubator farms throughout Ohio will provide apprenticeship experiences for participants. New farmers will be required to work at these farms a few times per month for the entire program year, while experienced farmers may request an exemption from this portion.

Farmers who complete the apprenticeship will be offered a plot of land to farm. Explains program leader Dr. Sid Dasgupta, "The plan is to connect Fastrack Farming farmers to land banks who may provide them with land to start a farm. The land is going to be temporarily leased to them." While it won't be theirs to keep, it can be used throughout their participation in the program. They will also receive a certificate of completion at the end.

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