

Dairy & Creamery Embraces Unique Business Model



Klein Farms' business model includes everything from artisanal cheese to petting zoos.

An Easton, Pa., dairy farm that's been in one family for 90 years has found a unique way to become profitable—by embracing the public.

"We allow the public to see farm animals that are kept near our store every day we're open, and we're only closed three days a year," says Beth Klein, an owner of Klein Farms Dairy & Creamery.

In recent years, Klein Farms has built a diversified and thriving creamery business that's serving them well in the midst of a population boom.

"My husband, Layne, says if you're going into a new venture kicking and

screaming, maybe it's not meant to be," Klein says. "We started this phase of our business back in 2003 when there were not many branching out into these kinds of dairy-related production lines. But we researched, educated ourselves, and found the right people to assist us. We have four children and their spouses, all involved to different degrees in the farming operation, and twelve grandchildren looking to carry it into the future."

The public can visit the cows and barns on weekend afternoons, weather permitting. But that's just the beginning, as the farm offers everything from artisan cheese to petting zoos.

"We're a spot for community events, including Cancer Awareness fundraising and a concert venue for our local Municipal Band," Klein says. "We have playground equipment for kids and host birthday parties and school tours. Every fall, we participate in the Northampton County Open Gate Tours, an event where farmers provide extra educational information about their

operations to the family visitors."

Public interest in raw milk proved to be the catalyst for the pivot into the current business model. Klein shares that they sell between 1,500 and 2,000 gals. a week from the 70-cow herd. Cheese production goes on five to six days a week in the creamery, which includes mozzarella, ricotta, spreads and aged cheeses, along with freshly made yogurt.

"For our raw milk, we've followed the rules and worked with our local inspectors. We do our best to produce a clean, healthy product and have gained the trust of many customers. They visit us from as far away as NYC on a regular basis."

Taking care of the cows can be a full-family affair.

"We have family members milk the cows, along with 4-H kids and friends," Klein says. "They have a certain time and day they are assigned and have agreed to help and get paid for their time in products from our Dairy Store. It all works out to everyone's advantage."

Finding interested customers hasn't proven to be a problem.

"At first, we advertised through newspaper and commercial ads," she says. "Advertisements translated into news articles about the farm, cheese making, and eventually ice cream production and sales. Word-of-mouth

is our best advertisement now."

There's always room for new expansion. Amanda, Beth's daughter-in-law, is hard at work establishing a cow-cuddling business.

"Individuals can book a time to 'cuddle' either a cow or two baby calves," says Klein.

While the farm isn't certified organic, the family avoids insecticides and aims to manage operations responsibly. Local farmers are inspired, and many come by to see what's working and get advice for their operations.

"Our biggest success is the fact that we're still farming today," Klein says. "Through our diversification, we can continue farming into the next generation."

Still, there are many challenges. "One is the rising costs of products and services," Klein says. "Next is dealing with the public. A generation or two ago, many families had someone they knew, a neighbor or uncle, who farmed. They understood animals and working the land. That isn't the case today. Educating the public takes patience and understanding."

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Website Improves Egg Sales

Abbie Golombiecki from Morris, Minn., set up a website to sell her farm-fresh eggs online to her local community.

"I started by using the website service Square," Golombiecki says. "The Square platform is pretty easy to navigate. It wasn't challenging at all to set up."

The website enables customers to order eggs online and choose pickup or delivery.

"That made it easier to make deliveries when people couldn't be home, but I was in town. It's nice to have another option for payment vs. leaving cash somewhere. Better yet, I can update stock on there, so I don't always have to know off the top of my head how many eggs I have for when people want big orders."

Customers can select between washed and unwashed eggs. Unwashed eggs can be stored at room temperature for up to two weeks. Pricing begins at \$4 a dozen for mixed-size eggs.

After an egg purchase, Golombiecki schedules delivery or meetup locations.

"I rarely set driving limits," she says. "I'll frequently deliver to Morris, Chokio, Alberta and Hancock areas, as I'm in those areas a lot. Going further out, I sometimes will do just a few extra dollars added for a driving fee, but sometimes will waive that if it's a big order or multiple stops. Further yet, I'll only deliver when I'm already going there. Usually, customers are willing to meet me halfway."

Golombiecki, who studied poultry man-

agement at Ridgewater College in Willmar, also raises beef cattle and believes the website should work well for selling beef, too.

"Here's my best advice—make sure your customers know about the website. For a while there, I only had one customer using it. When you're starting out, advertising on social media, making business cards, or whatever else, mention the website. And stick with it. Even though I nearly shut it down when I had just one customer, now it's nice to have it up and running."

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Butcher Shop With On-Site Processing

Stinson's Country Style Meats, Houston, Minn., has a physical presence in its community. However, husband and wife Jamie and Michelle Stinson started the business by going farm-to-farm, doing slaughter, cutting and wrapping meat.

"We had a combined 32 years in the business when we tried to buy a local meat processor," says Michelle Stinson. "When it fell through, we bought all the tools and equipment we needed from a company in Melrose, Wis., and started traveling to farms."

When Michelle says we, she truly means it. She's just as likely to be doing the slaughter, cutting, wrapping and smoking as Jamie. It was a team effort, which continues today.

The Stinsons had the support of her parents, who not only encouraged them but also helped out.

"My dad converted a reefer to hold up to six beef carcasses at a time," says Stinson. "My dad rigged it up with its own hoist and winch. We could haul the animal up, skin and gut it, and cut it into quarters."

In addition to beef, hogs and sheep, the two also handled in-season deer processing.

They were able to rent an inspected and certified workspace with a smoker and developed their own recipes for sausage and venison.

After two years of mobile work, they purchased a building 50 miles to the west in Michelle's hometown of Houston. With her family's help, they repurposed the building and moved in all the tools and equipment, including the smoker. They opened the business with her parents, Dave and Kathie Erdmann.

"We opened the week they shut down the state because of COVID-19," recalls Stinson. "When we opened back up, the business really took off and flourished."

Within a few months, the custom slaughter business was booked a year in advance. Forward booking continues today, but the Stinsons try to keep it to only six months.

The business keeps growing. The Stinsons began with part of the building and have since expanded to the entire building.

One thing hasn't changed since their days of on-farm slaughter: they recognized then that it reduced stress on the animals. Research has shown that lower stress in animals leads to better meat quality. Although animals are now transported by truck, the facility was designed to minimize animal stress.

"There are no sharp edges where the animal walks, and they have firm footing," she says. "There's only one way for them to walk and in one direction. They can't look out of the chute, but they have plenty of light. The more light, the better, as a cow won't go through a dark area."

Stinson notes that they still occasionally do on-farm slaughter when requested. Whether on the farm or at the slaughter facility, she says her farm clients value the humane handling.

"We have several retired dairy farmers helping in the plant, and they say how you handle the animal is what the farmer judges you on," says Stinson.

In addition to custom slaughter, Stinson's Meats holds an "equal to" certification from the state of Minnesota. It allows them to buy animals from farmers, slaughter them, and sell the meat retail.

They've become a go-to place for hot dogs in particular. Using traditional spices, they make and slowly smoke up to 600 lbs. of hot dogs each week. Additionally, their store features well-stocked freezers and fresh meat coolers with steaks, roasts, sausages, bacon and more.



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The "equal to" certificate enables them to fulfill customers' specific requests.

"We have customers who ask for meat from grass-fed animals and even from specific breeds, such as Jersey or Charolais," says Stinson. "Oftentimes, it's the breed they were used to eating when they grew up. They'll place an order, and we'll let them know when it's available."

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