

Willow Run Dairy feature

By Jeff Louderback

Dressed in his Sunday best, a man once appeared at the front door of Dennis and Patti Dean's home in rural Sugarcreek Township near Xenia. He told them he was investigating the rumor that country music star Wynonna Judd had moved in and built a recording studio disguised as a barn. Amused, the Deans told the man the only Wynonna on their farm was a goat. "Actually, at the time she was one of our better milkers," Patti laughs.

Nowadays, visitors to the Deans' farm are more likely to know what they'll find there. On 165 acres outside Bellbrook, the Deans operate Willow Run Dairy. With 1,200 does and bucks in six barns, it has the largest herd of dairy goats in the U.S. Situated on rolling green fields with pristine white fences, lush trees and colorful wildflowers, the Dean estate - complete with a stately mansion reminiscent of Southfork Ranch on Dallas, an elegant gated entry and rows of willow trees - looks like one of several horse farms in the area. Nearly 400 gallons of goats' milk a week passes through Willow Run's processing plant, which the Deans have opened for tours along with other portions of the farm. More than 30 tour groups a month have the opportunity to pet the goats (many named for music and movie stars), sample the products and learn that the dairy industry isn't entirely about cows. Tours take guests through the dairy barn, which houses milking does, and the milking parlor, where computerized equipment monitors how much milk each doe produces. Inside the processing plant, visitors can see workers bottling milk and making cheese that the Deans sell under the brand name Caprine Estates. The cheese and other goats' milk products, like fudge, are also available for purchase on site in a retail store that also sells collectibles.

It's the kid barn, however, that is most visitors' favorite stop since the young goats are bustling with energy and affection. Tour guides are quick to supply facts about the four-hoofed residents of the farm, attempting to dispel myths about the animal. Goats are not gruff, Patti Dean says. "Actually, they're a lot like dogs. They are extremely affectionate and curious."

Guides find that guests are often more anxious to visit the goats than to try products made from the milk. Although worldwide more people drink goats' milk than cows, the lack of familiarity inside the U.S. with goats as dairy animals poses real challenges for U.S. dairy goat farmers. But with each tour through their facility, the Deans work to change false perceptions, demonstrating that their milk is not bitter and foul-smelling, but sweet and flavorful and also, since it is more easily digestible than cows' milk, an alternative for people who are lactose intolerant. Moreover, Jeff Nagel, a Caprine Estates chef who compiles recipes using goats' milk, creates culinary delights ranging from cream sauces for pasta to chocolate-covered strawberry cheesecake. "Goats' milk can be substituted anywhere a recipe calls for cows' milk," says Nagel.

Owning a dairy farm is not what the Deans envisioned in the early 1980s when they lived

on another farm outside Dayton. Wishing to clear some land for horses, they obtained four goats to graze. The goats didn't touch the brush on the land, but one of the does gave birth and Patti was so hooked by the newborn kid she started accumulating even more goats in hopes of showing them in competition. Eventually a five-car garage on the farm was serving as a home for the goats before the Deans decided to start investigating the viability of a dairy goat farm.

They met with seasoned dairy goat farmers around the country, listening to success stories and hearing about failed ventures. They learned that goats' milk, common in Europe, accounts for more than 70 percent of all milk purchased worldwide. In the U.S., the industry is in its infancy with only 260 licensed dairies. Only 20 of them had more than 50 milking does, and at the time they thought about opening a dairy, the Deans already had more than 200 does in their herd.

Currently, the Deans are searching for a distributor to place their products throughout the Midwest and East. When Willow Run reaches 600 milking does later this year, the dairy will remain at that number. The Deans will meet the excess demand by purchasing raw milk from dairy goat farmers in the region.

Today, Patti Dean meets three busloads of schoolchildren arriving at the dairy. The children use their fingers to clamp their noses in response to the country farm air. Then their eyes gleam with excitement as they move into a barn where month-old kids eagerly entertain the youngsters. The goats jostle for position, welcoming their curious audience.

An hour later, after the buses pull away, Patti walks into the dairy barn, where 500 does are housed in spacious pens. One particularly affable goat approaches her, affectionately nudging her outstretched hand.

"That's Mary Poppins. She always has a smile on her face," Patti says with a laugh. "No matter how tired you are, or how your day has gone, it's hard not to smile back when you have friends like these."

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