

NOT UDDER NONSENSE

Hot Springs producer milks own dairy cows for healthy product, family working and learning together

By Barton Stam

“Keeping a house cow is a 365-day obligation,” notes Sonja Becker in Hot Springs County.

Becker milks five Jersey dairy cows at Becker Farm west of Thermopolis. There are also some dry, mature cows, young heifers (haven’t calved yet), and some steers that are being grass-finished to be sold for meat. Most of her herd originated in Wisconsin. She prefers Jerseys because of their mild temperament, efficient use of feed, and the high fat content of their milk.

Uses Paddock Rotation

Jerseys at the Becker Farm graze a grass/alfalfa pasture late spring through fall. A high-intensity, short-duration grazing rotation uses the pasture efficiently and provides adequate periods of rest for plants.

An electric fence holds the cows in each paddock. Paddock size is based on how much the cows can eat between rotations. Ideally, a paddock will be sized so cows will have just grazed all the feed down to an owner’s desired stubble height and not be left hungry by the time they are moved to the next paddock. Stubble height will depend on the time of year and species of forage. Grazing down to the right stubble height will maximize feed utilization without damaging plants.

The milk cows are also fed hay from the farm. A dairy mineral is



CREAM OF THE CROP – Sonja Becker skims cream off milk from their cows.

offered free choice. The only grain given is a small portion of oats while they are milked.

Calf Kept with Cow

The cows are eager for grain and to be milked as they are brought in from the pasture. Each cow quietly takes its turn in the milking station. Becker does not wean the calves at birth. She separates the cow from the calf each morning and then the cow has milk to give by that afternoon. Every cow and calf pair are reunited after each milking.

Becker only needs to milk once – at 3 p.m. Each cow will give 3 to

3 1/2 gallons of milk per day during the high point in its lactation cycle. Once they start to dry up, production dwindles to a gallon or less.

Milk production could be increased by feeding more grain and milking twice a day.

Sonja prefers to feed her cows local, organically grown grain. The Becker Farm is not certified organic, but they strive to get close. Becker tried using organic techniques even for mastitis infections (a painful infection of the udder). However, she believes antibiotics clear up the infections faster and are better for the cow.



Sonja Becker prepares a cow's udder for milking.

Milk Production Factors

Milk production requires a plentiful supply of good-quality drinking water. Becker noticed cows drink less water in the winter because the water is so cold. This decreases milk production. Straw or other bedding material can help maintain milk production by protecting udders from cold temperatures.

Becker cleans and dries each cow's udder before hooking up the milking machine. She wears latex gloves for sanitary reasons and to prevent her skin from chapping. Some of the cows are reluctant to let down their milk; gently massaging their udders will usually get the milk flowing better.

The milking machine uses vacuum pressure to draw the milk out. Each cow is hooked to the machine for less than 10 minutes; their teats can be damaged if left on too long, and milk production will decrease if taken off too soon. When the flow of milk slows down, it's time to take off the machine. Milking machines can cost more than \$2,000 – a big investment if you only have one cow.

Nothing fancy is needed to milk a cow, especially if they are trained well. Becker suggests a stainless steel and seamless milk pail is the minimum equipment needed;

stainless steel is easiest to sanitize. A chlorine/water mix sanitizes milking equipment. She says her uncle used to milk his cow in the pasture with just a stool and a bucket.

Milk for Own Consumption

I watched Sonja in her kitchen skim cream off the top of some chilled, settled milk. The milk is put into glass jars after milking and placed in the refrigerator 48 hours to cool and allow the cream to rise to the top. It looked delicious, but I wasn't able to taste any.

Families with their own milk cow can consume the raw milk, but it is against Wyoming law to sell or give unpasteurized milk to someone else. The Wyoming Department of Consumer Health Services inspectors enforce dairy regulations. Unpasteurized milk ordinances were

established nationally in the early 1920s to control the spread of milk-borne diseases, which were common at that time, such as scarlet fever.

Sonja uses the rich cream for cheese, butter, and as a topping on fruit. Butter is made in a traditional churner, an upright blender, or even in a glass jar that is hand shaken. For making ice cream, Sonja prefers a milk ice cream mixture, saying the cream is too high in fat content for good ice cream. For longer storage, she tells me milk will keep well in a freezer, but the cream will not. The excess milk is fed to their pigs and chickens.

Becker believes her fresh milk is healthier than store-bought milk, and that having milk cows is a good way for families to spend time working and learning together.



If considering a milk cow...

Milk cows require a big commitment. They have to be cared for each day. Someone thinking about getting a milk cow should educate themselves, says Sonja Becker, and consider factors such as how will they get their cow bred every year.

Cows that aren't reproducing do not produce milk. Most people don't want to keep a bull. Leasing a bull can work, but the cow must be in the right stage of her heat cycle when she's with the bull. Artificial insemination is the alternative, but that can have complications, too – a trained person is needed to perform the procedure, and semen can be hard to get in small numbers and must be stored properly.

This cow comes to the barn knowing it's time for milking.

Barton Stam likes milk. He is also a University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Hot Springs County and serves Big Horn, Fremont, Park, and Washakie counties and the Wind River Indian Reservation. He can be reached at (307) 864-3421 or at brstam@uwyo.edu.