

## Dairy farmers look for a market on their doorstep



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What can you do if you are a dairy farmer in an embattled industry, unhappy about the supermarkets' increasing control over milk prices and needing to create enough income to enable your son to join the family business?

For Karen and Steve Reynolds of Iden Manor farm in Staplehurst, Kent, the answer was to expand into cheesemaking — they founded Kingcott Cheese in 2009 — and, last year, sold it direct to the consumer. In early 2015, when Frank, the second of their three children, announced that he wanted to join the business, milk prices were dropping. The farm produces 14,000 litres of milk a week, 25 per cent of which is used for the Kentish blue cheese range. The rest was being sold to a processor.

"We were pleased Frank wanted to follow in our footsteps," says Karen. "We just needed another income stream to ensure a future for him." Steve adds: "Milk prices have always fluctuated, but last April they were down again due to over-supply because Ireland and Holland had pushed up production."

Frank, 19, investigated how much demand there would be for milk sold direct from the farm and found enough interest to justify the £80,000 needed to be spent on equipment to pasteurise and bottle their product. Farmers are allowed to sell raw (unpasteurised) cows' direct to the consumer. They drink raw milk as a family — "As do all farmers," says Steve. "It tastes better and retains more goodness." However, they decided against selling it raw. "The farm is not on the road front so we can't sell it at the farm gate, and it's a much smaller market because people feel safer drinking pasteurised milk. You also need your cows tested for TB annually instead of every four years."

With the equipment and EU and environmental health paperwork in place, Kingcott Dairy started in November 2015. "We milk the cows at 5am, sterilise the equipment, heat the milk to pasteurise it, bottle, then deliver it. It's four hours from cow to bottle, you can't get fresher than that," says Frank.

The milk and cream are free range because the cows are outside for more than the legal minimum of 180 days a year. Frank is confident that he can expand the Kentish Free Range Milk business, despite the fact

that, even with the support of farming subsidies, there are only 9,800 dairy farms in the UK against 27,000 20 years ago. "People already know about our cheese and they like that the milk has come straight from a local farm. Kentish and free range are the buzz words. People say it tastes better too," he says. According to Karen, "We're putting the face back into dairy farming."

As yet, Frank's business consumes a fraction of the milk production, most of which is still sold to a processor. "The special thing is that we do everything here. We're building the business up, the demand is there for the product."

Steve and Karen started making cheese in 2009 to counter a slump in milk prices. With 150 cows on 300 acres, they could not expand the herd. "We needed to diversify to survive," says Karen. "There were already a lot of ice cream producers in Kent, so we decided on cheese."

Steve went on a cheese course in Cheshire. "The course was four days, then it took us two years to perfect the product," he says. "We decided to produce blue cheese, which takes two-to-three months to mature against cheddar's eight or nine. We were very excited when we produced our first batch, but it tasted dreadful." With the help of consultants, the cheese improved enough for the Reynolds to start selling it after six months. Their initial £45,000 investment paid off and they now sell 15 tonnes a year. "Supermarkets have asked us to supply them but we refuse," says Steve. "We'd end up working for them. We'd invest, then they cut the price."

The Reynolds family switched their cows to a grass diet, which produces better milk with higher protein and butterfat, and cut the herd to 80 brown swiss and holstein friesians. Many farmers are increasing herd sizes in an attempt to beat lower prices or to fulfil supermarket orders, which can make them vulnerable. Brexit is another tricky area. "From dairy farmers' point of view, if we had a government and farm leaders strong enough to say we're not going to put up with cheap dairy imports, most would want to leave the EU," says Steve. "We don't have that at the moment."