

Farm Tour of Jumping Gully Dairy **Al and Desiree Wehner**

Prior to 1993 Al and Desiree Wehner were partners at LAD Dairy in Ashville, Florida, where they milked 1,100 Holsteins 3 times per day in a conventional system with barns, fans, misters and everything else involved in housing cows. They farmed 500 irrigated acres (triple cropped) and 250 acres of hay cut four times per year to provide the basis of the total mixed ration for their herd in addition to 200 acres of pasture to supplement heifers.

Although successful from the standpoint of that style of dairying, after buying out their partner's cows and equipment to go off on their own, Al and Desiree made the choice to change their lifestyle (and that of their cows) to a grazing style of dairying. Their original grazing dairy, Green Hill Dairy, was born in 1993 and is located 15 miles from the Florida state line in Quitman, Georgia. In 1993 there were very few models to emulate (especially in the very deep south), therefore they have learned many lessons to get to this point today. One definite fact is that nothing ever stays the same. Their dairies are very fluid and capable of changing due to the relatively low capital investments. A brief description of their operations follows:

The climate in their area is very hot and humid in the summers and has freezes in the winter. Rainfall averages about 55 inches per year, but is irregular. In the summer at least 1 inch of rain or irrigation water is needed weekly to maintain adequate pasture growth. Their part of the country happens to be located on top of one of the largest aquifers in the world, and this available water is the heart of their business model.

Green Hill Dairy, which is now Buddha Belly Dairy, is owned by son and daughter-in-law, Clay and Amanda Wehner. It consists of 260-irrigated and 50-acres of dry land pastures. Their calving season begins in mid-October and will peak at about 580 cows in 2015. The milking shed is a New Zealand swing-over style barn with 42 milking units where they milk 200-250 cows per hour, depending on the season, with two people in the pit. Their milking cows are proportioned 5-25 lbs. of grain per day (depending on stage of lactation and pasture quality and quantity) which they receive only during milking.

Grassy Flats Dairy began operation in December 2006. They begin calving in December this year and will peak at close to 600 cows. This property consists of 245 acres of irrigated and 35 acres of dry land pastures. The farm is located 17 miles north of Green Hill and differs little from the original dairy other than the calving and breeding cycle. Cows at this dairy have proportioned grain supplied at milking, which can be adjusted according to grass quality and quantity. The milking shed consists of a swing-40 New Zealand style parlor which can milk >200 cows per hour with 2 people milking.

The most recent and the smallest dairy, Jumping Gully Dairy, began operation March 2009 in a swing-30 milking shed and will peak at about 470 cows which will calve in a 45-day window from mid-October until December 1. It consists of 250 acres with 190 being irrigated with three center pivots and 30 being dry land acres.

The Wehner breeding program currently utilizes a three-way cross using Jersey, Holstein and Norwegian Red genetics selected for what they believe to be profitable in their system. They breed AI once on the heifers and for 2 cycles on the milking cows followed with Black Angus clean up bulls. The bulls are typically removed from the herds July 1 with all open cows sold in the fall. They range from 55-65% AI bred cows in their breeding window. This year 88 open cows were sold out of the total milking herd of 1,450 cows.

Currently, all heifer calves born in the respective calving seasons are reared by each dairy until they are properly weaned and moved to a “run-off” farm. They are started with the mob feeding system similar to that used in New Zealand and are reared completely on pasture until they reach the milk herd at calving. They supplement with grain as needed, but their intention is to have heifers grazing on high quality pasture for most of their growth period. They own two additional farms for heifer rearing. One is a 235- acre farm of which 145 are irrigated and 50 acres are dry land pasture. Another run-off heifer farm has 150 acres (45 rented) of which 60 are irrigated and another 75 are dry land pasture.

Some of their greatest challenges have been determining the correct forages for maximizing profitability using their grazing platforms. They have run the gamut from establishing improved perineal grasses such as Tifton 85 Bermudagrass, and Tift 9 Bahia to their current rotation of oats and annual ryegrass in the winter to millet and native crabgrass in the summer. In 2014 they took out a portion of the grazing platform on each dairy in May to grow corn silage and followed it with millet after chopping it off in August.

In 2000, they started Sweet Grass Dairy, a farmstead cheese operation. It is a growing business now owned by Jessica and Jeremy Little, their daughter and son-in-law. In 2010 their youngest son, Kyle, and daughter-in-law, Janelle, started a yogurt operation called Dreaming Cow Creamery which is located at the Jumping Gully Dairy operation.

Desiree adds, “Life has been a series of exciting adventures in our dairy careers. We feel quite fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn and to grow our business ourselves and now with the next generation. We welcome you and thank you for giving us the honor of your visit!”

Al and Desiree Wehner

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