

Tillamook family embraces past and future

By GEOFF PARKS
For the Capital Press

TILLAMOOK, Ore. — While Levi Bennett is reaching to the past in reviving a fresh-milk bottling-and-delivery trade from his Bennett Family Farm in Tillamook, Ore., his father, Norm, is looking to the future by introducing a robotic milking system at his nearby dairy, Valley Venture Farms.

Levi, 28, and his wife, Courtney, 24, set up shop on the outskirts of the city about a 1 1/2 years ago and is producing about 700 gallons of milk per week from his 50 or so Jersey milk cows. That might

not seem to be a large operation, but it's his business plan that's the revolutionary part of the enterprise.

A 2010 article in Wired Magazine called milk in glass bottles "a specialty or niche market these days, and home milk delivery is pretty much a thing of the past." But both concepts are thriving at Bennett Family Farm these days.

"We're small in comparison to everyone else, so we don't go to the creamery," Levi said. "We bottle our own milk (in glass bottles) and deliver it all to our 525 customers, 500 of which are homes." He said he delivers about 1,400 to 1,500 bottles each week.



Norm Bennett and his son, Blaise, check out the operation of their Valley Venture Farm robotic milking system. The farm is in Tillamook, Ore.

He said that customer base takes in most of Tillamook County and a small area of Clatsop County. He, Courtney and Norm do all the milking and processing during the week and bottle the milk every other day. Levi does the deliveries on the other days.

"Kinda what we're shooting for is the nostalgia of it," Levi said. "Milk is the most wholesome product in the world. It has everything you need."

"My goal is to be a sustainable farm and be a part of the community," he said.

About a mile west, across busy Highway 101, lies Valley Venture Farms, where Norm is at the other end of the dairy-production spectrum with his own milking methods at the 120-cow dairy.

Valley Venture Farms encompasses 270 acres, all owned by Norm and his wife, Dory.

Their other son, Blaise, works with them at their farm, which added two DeLaval robotic milking machines a short while ago at a cost of nearly \$500,000.

"Each robot can handle about 60 cows a day," Norm said.

The Bennetts moved to the land in 1961, and have a daughter, Amber, who lives in Alaska.

They have only one full-time employee now that the robotic systems are in place, whereas they had three employees before.

"It (the DeLaval system) pencils out as cheaper than the labor in the long run," Bennett said.



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Levi Bennett cleans bottles in preparation for filling and delivery from his Bennett Family Farms fresh-milk delivery business in Tillamook, Ore.

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