

Small SE Idaho dairy sees steady demand for products

By DIANNA TROYER
For the Capital Press

Despite rejections from lenders, Phil and Stephanie Christensen never gave up hope of running a small niche dairy in southeastern Idaho.

"Lenders told us our business model wasn't a proven market, and it was too risky for them financially," says Phil, while milking Dinner Belle and 10 other cows at the dairy where his wife, Stephanie, grew up near Almo, Idaho.

"We had to come up with the initial investment ourselves," says Phil, "so we farmed a year with Stephanie's dad when hay prices were strong and put some of that profit into the dairy."

They invested about \$50,000 to expand the farm's original milk parlor. They also bought cows with Jersey and Holstein bloodlines, a new stainless steel storage vat, returnable half-gallon glass bottles and other equipment.

Since opening the Old Almo Creamery in August 2012 they have cultivated loyal customers. With a yield of 400 gallons of milk per week, the Christensens make and sell cheeses, ice cream, pasteurized milk and raw milk at farmers' markets, restaurants, grocery stores and health food stores.

"We've proven the bankers wrong because there's a steady demand for our products," Phil says. "We won't get rich doing this, but it's gratifying to provide quality food and to be able to raise our family here."

Justin Kay, manager at Papa Kelsey's in Burley, buys the dairy's mozzarella, cheddar, provolone blend and pepper jack cheeses.

"Phil's cheeses have a dense texture and rich taste that gives our sandwiches and pizza a distinctive flavor," Kay says. "We like to support local farmers who give us great



Dianna Troyer/For the Capital Press

Phil Christensen fills a returnable glass bottle at the Old Almo Creamery, a small niche dairy he and his wife, Stephanie, own in southeastern Idaho.

fresh products."

The Christensens also sell raw milk to health food stores NourishMe in Ketchum and Nature's Pantry in Salmon.

"To me, the raw milk tastes richer and more robust than what's sold in a grocery store," says Amber Pace, an employee at Nature's Pantry. "Customers say they like the nutritive value and cream layer because it's not homogenized."

Besides selling their dairy products, the Christensens

give tours of their business for field trips, family reunions and Boy Scout troops.

"People tell us they want their kids to know where their food comes from and want them to see the food production process from the cow to the final product," Phil says.

As they talk about their dairy, milk streams steadily into glass containers that were once used by Stephanie's father, Kent Durfee.



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