

# Dairy branches out with on-farm bottling

By **CECILIA PARSONS**  
For the Capital Press

Top O' The Morn Farms Inc. is closing in on a goal set in 2012 when Tulare, Calif., area dairy producers Ron and Evie Locke expanded into retail sales and started one of the few farmstead milk glass bottling operations in the state.

The Lockes, owners of Top O' The Morn Farms, started in 2012 to send about 1 percent of their daily milk production to their on-site processing and bottling facility.

Two years later, the plant was processing 2 percent.

This year, Ron Locke said the business continues to move toward using 7 percent of the farm's daily milk volume.

"Cow numbers have remained the same for the past four years, but going into retail — it's been a tremendous amount of work," said Locke.

Top O' The Morn Farms is a member of Dairy Farmers of America, which processes the majority of the dairy's milk from 2,000 Holsteins. Milk that is piped to the processing plant on the dairy is used for a variety of products, including sweet cream butter — the farm's newest addition.

Milk from Top O' The Morn Farms is bottled in half-gallon, quart and "mini" 16.9-ounce glass bottles.

Their white milk comes in 2 percent, skim and whole. Their flavored milks — which are popular items — come in chocolate, strawberry, root beer, coffee and peanut butter and chocolate.

The dairy business also bottles half-and-half, heavy cream and seasonal eggnog. Buyers in grocery stores pay a deposit on the returnable bottle.

Top O' The Morn Farms has also carved out a niche in home delivery of not only milk but locally sourced



Photos by Cecilia Parsons/For the Capital Press

Ron Locke of Top O' the Morn Farms feeds his friendly Holsteins during a short break from his duties overseeing milk production, processing and delivery at his Tulare County, Calif., dairy.

food items including butter, cheese, eggs and coffee.

All of these products can be delivered to customers who are on routes from the Fresno-Clovis area to Tulare and Visalia.

The products are delivered between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. to an owner's ice-filled cooler. Top O' The Morn also operates a popular drive-thru dairy store in Tulare.

The bulk of their retail sales is trucked to grocery stores in the Central Valley and the Central Coast. Top O' The Morn milk products can be found from the Fresno-Clovis area to Exeter and on the Central Coast from Paso Robles to Carpinteria in independent grocery stores

and at Albertsons stores.

The on-site processing niche does set the dairy apart from its neighbors in dairy-rich Tulare County, but Locke notes that the workload requires much more than dairy management. Besides growing feed for the cows, overseeing nutrition, cow comfort and milking, Locke has to keep hundreds of customers and retailers happy with his product.

Evidence of his success at that comes in the form of recent awards received by Top O' The Morn. In 2015 their Sweet Cream Salted Butter was named the New Product Buyers Choice at the Fresno Food Expo. Top O' The Morn Farms was also honored at

the Los Angeles County Fair's International Dairy Products Competition.



Bottling strawberry-flavored milk at the Top O' The Morn milk processing facility at the dairy.

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