

Clover Mountain Dairy: When small is good

By **BRIAN WALKER**
For the Capital Press

CHEWELAH, Wash. — Clover Mountain Dairy near Chewelah, Wash., transformed an empty 40-acre field into an organic dairy destined for statewide sales in three years.

“We built up the farm and associated infrastructure from scratch as our U.S. Coast Guard commitments allowed,” said Stacy Thomas, who owns the business with his wife, Virginia.

“We began with fluid whole milk in glass bottles, but soon expanded into other flavored milks like chocolate, eggnog and a particularly popular coffee version called Cafe Latte. Now we also make whole milk yogurt and cheese including feta, cheddar curds, cheddar, Monterey jack, pepper jack and Gouda.”

Stacy takes the lead on technical aspects of production and processing, while Virginia spearheads marketing and sales.

“We both work in all areas and really enjoy working together on our own schedule,” Stacy said. “We can keep the farm a manageable size and make a good living with a small herd by direct marketing.”

Stacy grew up riding his family’s milk trucks around eastern Washington and

northern Idaho and worked on a dairy before joining the Coast Guard in 2000. While on active duty, both sought out learning and work experience on dairies wherever they were stationed.

Clover Mountain Dairy, certified organic by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, has Jersey cows with New Zealand genetics and are grass-fed.

“The New Zealand genetics really allow the cows to excel on pasture as they are more efficient grazers and seem to hold body condition better on forage alone,” Stacy said. “Our cows are incredibly healthy and hardy, so vet bills are minimal. They have amazing foot health as well with no need to ever trim hooves.”

“The Jerseys live up to their creamy reputation with our milk averaging 5 to 7% butterfat, which really makes our products stand out to our customers.”



Brandon Hansen

Stacy and Virginia Thomas own a 40-acre organic dairy in northeast Washington near Chewelah.

The cows are milked once a day in the morning in a refurbished Surge side-opener parlor.

“Even with a small herd, it was important to us to have a raised parlor for our back and knees,” Stacy said. “We also really like the ability to see the entire side of the cow, as that is really

important for monitoring animal health and catching anything early. We bucket milked in the parlor for the

first two years, but are currently installing a pipeline.”

Milk is cooled and held in a 130-gallon Van-Vetter bulk tank until it is transferred to the processing room.

“We love our set-up and are happy with how it has performed,” Stacy said.

The dairy has four milk cows this year and will have eight next year.

“We plan to grow to milk around 10 cows on average,” Stacy said. “Our land and infrastructure could support 20 to 25 cows, but we don’t want to push ourselves or our land that hard.”

Located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in northeast Washington, the farm is far enough east that it is spared from the worst

effects of the Cascades’ rain shadow and gets 18 to 20 inches of rain. The orientation of the Rocky Mountains also shields the farm from the worst of the arctic air from the north. The area has four distinct seasons with panoramic views of valleys and mountains.

“The area was always a milk shed for eastern Washington because of these attributes, which allows lush pastures and hardy cows,” Stacy said.

Stacy and Virginia have learned from trial and error and mentors rather than the college education route.

“We’re pretty transparent, chronicling our farm journey on our YouTube channel,” he said.



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