

“Grass Cheese” Fills Niche Market

The Keith Marshall family of Unionville, Virginia has found a formula for success in branching out from dairy farming to retail sales of their own specialty “grass” cheeses and other unique food items.

Besides selling at local farmers’ markets, they opened “Marshall Farms Corner Shop,” a retail store located a mile from their farm. The shop includes a small deli for the daily breakfast/lunch crowd who enjoys their sandwich specials, coffee, chai tea, and fresh baked goods. The Marshalls also sell wine and Christmas gift boxes.

“Marshall Farms Natural Cheeses” are made entirely from grass-fed dairy cows on their own farm. It gives the cheese a unique taste and texture since, as they say, “Whatever the cows eat comes out in the flavor of the cheese.”

Their cheeses are made by Ashe County Cheese in West Jefferson, North Carolina. The Marshalls say cheese-making is an art and they prefer to concentrate on the other parts of the business.

“Our job is to provide the best possible milk,” Keith Marshall says. “Our cheeses taste better and are more natural than anything in the stores – there’s a discernable difference.”

The Marshalls only use milk produced when the cows are grazing during peak growing season.

“In the spring, when the pastures are exploding with growth and nutritional value, our cows are producing the ultimate quality milk, so we collect, store and earmark it for cheese. Depending on the year, this happens anytime from late April to June and then again from late September to early November,” Keith Marshall says.

Several times in the spring and in the fall, the family transports three days worth of milk (36,000 lbs., which makes 4,000 lbs. of cheese) to Ashe County Cheese which is 5 hrs. away.

“Our cheeses have a smooth, creamy texture,” says Marshall. “We currently have eight varieties: cheddar, Monterey jack, tomato basil jack, pepper jack, garlic parsley chive cheddar, bacon chive cheddar, caraway cheddar, and Monterey jack with dill. The selection varies according to what is and isn’t selling well.”

Marshall’s milking herd ranges from 120 cows in winter, to a peak of 300 in spring and fall. They are rotationally grazed and naturally bred, constituting a mixed heritage of Brown Swiss, Holstein, Jersey and



Marshall Farms Corner Shop, a mile from the farm, sells cheese made from grass-fed dairy cattle.

Ayreshire. The cows graze on high energy grasses such as rye, bluegrass, clover and some native fescues.

“There’s not much cheese being made in Virginia,” Marshall says, adding that he’s proud to produce his own product and market it.

“It takes a long time to get a business going. Right now, after three years, the cheese division is pretty much self supporting,” Marshall says. “Demand is becoming greater

and greater each year. Christmas orders are growing annually by three-fold.”

The family produces about 16,000 lbs. of cheese per year and it retails in the \$7 to \$8 per pound range.

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They Make Their Living “Dowsing” For Water

James and Carol Kuebelbeck of St. Joseph, Minn. make their living entirely from dowsing, - sometimes known as water witching - and say their careers were built on a reputation that comes from 4,000 successful jobs over the past 30 years.

“Dowsing is very interesting work for us. I first got into it while trying to discredit it,” James explains. “Eventually, I learned that I could find water where well drillers and geologists had been unable to.”

The Kuebelbecks generally travel in a 100-mi. radius from their home and charge a flat rate fee for their services, depending on the distance traveled. They perform at least 100 jobs per year, and spend two to four hours working on each job. Kuebelbeck says they always provide clients with the

two best drilling locations to choose from.

“Our job is to keep farmers, ranchers and landowners from spending all their money drilling dry holes. It’s very satisfying to be able to do this, especially when you can go out after everyone has given up and find water,” he says.

If you’re interested in learning more about dowsing, the Kuebelbecks are members of the American Society of Dowsers, which educates people about the ancient skill.

With 83 local chapters throughout the United States, the ASD says everyone is born with the capability to dowse, and children up to the age of 16 are almost universally sensitive.

The group states that up to 20 percent of adults will obtain a dowsing reaction imme-

diately upon trying (if properly instructed beforehand), and others may have to practice for a while. In either case, extensive practice is necessary to obtain a consistent standard of competence.

The ASD provides assistance, guidance and encouragement to beginners, and promotes scientific research into the dowsing phenomena.

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Kuebelbeck, who became interested in dowsing while trying to discredit it, spends 2 to 4 hrs. on each job.

New Cash Crop Looking For Growers

Seed breeder Glenn Page has been working on a new cash crop for nearly 20 years. Niger seed sells for \$1 to \$2 a pound retail and nearly all seed is imported from India.

Page has developed two new varieties of the small-seeded, bee-pollinated crop. For the past five years, he has been working with growers to identify where and how to grow it commercially.

Niger has an attractive yellow flower and attracts both the birds and bees when planted around a house or garden. When cultivated on a large scale, the seed is harvested as bird feed.

“I think niger seed could be grown as a second crop after winter wheat in double crop areas or after peas in the upper Midwest,” says Page.

So far, the best producers have achieved yields as high as 700 lbs. per acre.

Often marketed as niger thistle seed, it is neither a thistle nor does it tend to self-

seed like common weeds. Niger is related to the aster family that includes asters, mums, daisies and sunflowers. Page has two varieties - one matures in 110 days from planting and reaches 4 to 5 ft. in height. The other matures in 90 days and reaches 2 to 3 ft. in height. Like the sunflower, the niger produces yellow flowers. Page has counted as many as 400 small yellow blossoms on a single plant. He reports they are covered with bees when in blossom and attract birds by the hundreds when in seed.

“In Ethiopia where it originated, it is known as the honey crop,” says Page. “I am getting a lot of interest in it as an inexpensive fall bee pasture when seeded in small grain stubble as a second crop.”

Page’s niger seed grows well over a wide area. He reports one customer doing well with it in England, while his best Canadian grower farms 50 miles north of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

“Niger seems to do better in drier areas or

when grown in rows in wetter areas where it can dry out,” says Page. “It also appears to be a low input crop, as North Dakota State University test plots showed no response to nitrogen application.”

Page sells his niger seed by the packet (1,500 seeds) for gardeners, as bird feed in 4-lb. and larger bags, and in larger quantities for commercial production. Prices range from \$5 for a seed packet to \$21 for two 4-lb. bags of bird feed. He warns that it is illegal under the Plant Variety Protection Act to save his niger seed for sale or for increased field production. Gardeners can save their seed for personal use.

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“I think niger seed could be grown as a second crop after winter wheat in double crop areas or after peas in the upper Midwest,” says seed breeder Glenn Page, noting that producers have had yields up to 700 lbs. per acre.