

THE CORSE FARM
SINCE 1868



Producer **OF THE** *Month*

October 2019



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE *Month*

by Jon Megas-Russell

The Corse Farm Dairy



Approximately 80% of open land in Vermont is managed by dairy farmers which are predominantly small family owned farms. Leon, Linda and Abbie Corse manage 375 acres in Whitingham and Wilmington, VT with many of those acres being open pasture for their cows. They are the 5th and 6th generation in their family to operate this dairy farm. This family is tremendously important to our region as dairy farming in Vermont protects and maintains our precious open land that otherwise would grow to forest or be turned into real estate. Additionally, it is a robust economic driver largely due to their large scale purchasing of farm supplies from machinery to building materials to grain. The Corse Farm Dairy became certified organic through Vermont Organic Farmers in 2008 and began shipping milk to CROPP cooperative/Organic Valley since then; they are among the

2,000 or so farmers nationally that own the cooperative. A purchase of an Organic Valley product is a purchase for the Corse family. Organic Valley functions within a deeply regionalized product system; when you purchase Organic Valley fluid milk you are buying their product. Without their transition to organic and to farmer-owners of Organic Valley, the Corses have no doubt their farm would have gone out of business. October is National Co-op Month and we are proud as a food co-op to share one family story of dairy farming and how the cooperative model has supported their continued success.

The Corse Farm Dairy has been in existence since 1868 when Leon's great-great-grandfather Charles Henry bought the property and started dairy farming. A few years later Leon's great-grandfather Lester took over and helped transform the farm from one that was almost

foreclosed on to one of profit. Lester ended up paying off the mortgage in 1896 which allows for the farm to make more profit now. Over the next 50 years Lester and Leons' grandfather Merroll worked together to bring the farm up to the mechanical age: installing bulk milk tanks and changing the stable from wooden to concrete floors. As many other farms went out of business, these innovations ensured their continued success. By the 1970's Leon was involved as his father Lewis had taken over the operation and Leon began to learn the ins and outs of dairy farming. During the 1970's they built a new facility to house the cows and increased the herd from 27 to 55. The original barn from 1868 was then housing baby calves and the new barn held the milking cows. By 2006 and under Leon's vision they created a new open circulation barn to house the youngstock and ended use of the original 1868 barn and

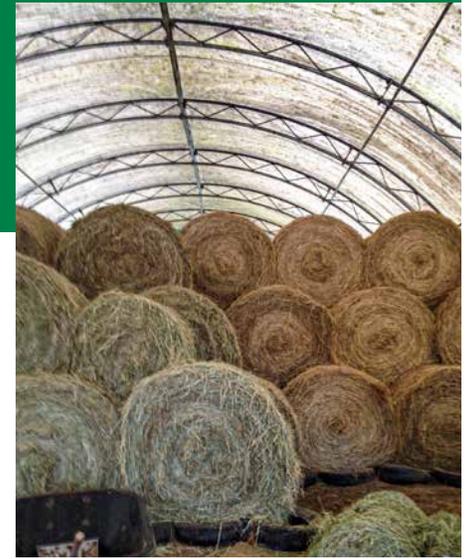


stable. Now as the fifth generation Corse to run the dairy, Leon's legacy is growing in many ways including the execution of excellent systems for water usage and pasturing. However, he feels that every generation has a signature contribution to the continued success of the farm and the farm's transition to organic is what Leon considers to be his. With his daughter Abbie waiting in the wings as the sixth generation of the Corse family, she will face tough decisions around land use and milk prices, but she is excited for her chance to take their dairy to the next level, building on the family's massive commitment to conservation and regeneration.

The Corse Farm Dairy has 375 acres with 109 in permanent pasture for the cows which is managed in both an organic and regenerative nature. Their entire farm resides in permanent sod. Their non-pastured acres are managed for hay production to feed the herd for the 7 months the cows cannot pasture. Their milking herd is about 50-55 Holstein and Jersey cows and their endless commitment to quality over quantity is demonstrated in their

countless milk quality awards. They make more money for their organic milk production and their practices provide positive inputs to soil, the land, the air and more. Furthermore, regenerative dairy farming essentially means taking a long-term approach to farming by improving the land and ensuring a healthy and thriving ecosystem filled with diverse wild plants, pollinators, birds and a wonderful life for the cows.

The expenses on their farm are higher in every situation due to following organic standards. Grain, in particular, is a very expensive piece of their operation with about 30% of annual revenue being allocated towards its purchase. Additionally, their total annual income from their milk varies based on a range of factors from weather, feed quality, and the market price of fluid milk. Their income is solely derived from fluid milk sales to Organic Valley with a small portion coming from Organic Prairie's cull cow program that utilizes older dairy cows for ground beef sales and local hay sales. With the milk production and other maintenance and facilities costs being



variable it's a tricky equation each year to keep the farm profitable even with the mortgage being paid off. The fact that they make more money for producing organic milk is helpful, but their income is still quite miniscule compared to the time, energy and resources put into their work and land. Many people around Vermont and the country forget about dairy farmers as being one of the most pivotal parts to our local, national, and global land management as well as an economic catalyst. Remember, these farmers are purchasing hundreds of feet of hoses, miles of electric fence, large scale amounts of diesel, solar panels, grain, and so many other integral inputs to ensure their cows are healthy, fed and housed effectively. We need dairy farmers in Vermont and across the country and we must treasure and support them in any way possible.

Not many small dairy farms can afford to process, bottle and ship their milk to retailers. Therefore, these farms get forgotten about because you cannot just stop by the farm to pick up your milk. This is where Organic Valley comes into the picture and is extremely helpful to farms in Windham County. Organic Valley picks up milk every two days, transports it to Barre, VT to process

and package before they distribute it back to retailers right here in Vermont and New England such as your Brattleboro Food Co-op. Every time the milk is picked up it is tested for specific quality measures, which are documented and paid back to the farmer as additional premium incentives. Thus, the milk you purchase and drink from our dairy coolers at the Brattleboro Food Co-op is likely from the Corse Farm and is of the highest quality you can purchase. We have heard that some shoppers are critical of Organic Valley because they are headquartered in Wisconsin and their milk is assumed to come from that region. This is not true; the milk comes from Vermont and from a local farm. You can be confident when you purchase the milk that you are supporting Windham County farmers and their families. When purchasing Organic Valley, you are directly supporting families such as the Corses to make a living and sustain their lives.

Organic Valley is very important to Leon and Abbie. Beyond just their processing, packaging, distribution, and marketing, it is their ability to set the highest standards in dairy farming within our country that sets them apart. For this reason and more, Leon serves on the Organic Valley Dairy Executive Committee and Pasture Committee that oversees the pasture process of 1,800 farmers in 32 states. He is quite qualified to support and mentor other Organic Valley farmers in Vermont and around the country. In fact, Leon was the first Vermont certified Master Grazer through the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Program. This is primarily a Midwest-based organization which has recently expanded to include VT, and is the only federally accredited apprenticeship for farming in the U.S. With this and his 40+ years of experience in dairy farming he takes a deep pride

in the fact that he can have a hand in strategy, standards and leading the direction of Organic Valley. Leon has witnessed Organic Valley save a lot of small family farms from extinction. Leon remembers when there were twelve dairies in Whitingham, four on Corse Road alone. Now only three exist in Whitingham.

Leon's day starts at 4am and ends at about 7pm. The cows are milked twice a day, once at 4:45am and again around 3pm. He stated that he only "works" about 10 days a year and all the other days dairy farming is what he does with his time. His pasturing experience is extensive and while he mentors many farms locally and nationally, he also loves to travel to other farms and pick up many new tips for how to run his farm.

The family splits the primary tasks between the three of them with Leon managing the milkings, day-to-day operations, and cropping, and Linda raising youngstock, milking, book-keeping, providing child care for Abbie's two sons, and all manner of tasks associated with keeping the family together. She is the farm's backbone and without her Leon and Abbie would be lost, in addition to her immense service within both their town and state. Abbie manages manure spreading and cropping, with the occasional milking, and all manner of random fencing and other cow wrangling tasks.

While Leon's background has always been in dairy farming Abbie took a much different route to her place on the farm. She studied Journalism at Saint Michael's College, she worked at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, the Telluride Film Festival, and MASS MoCA, and assumed she would never come back to farming. However, in 2007 a large barn fire drove a conversation within the family regarding the future viability of the farm. After all her

insistence otherwise, Abbie came to realize that her heart belonged to her family's land and she came back to the farm a year later on the heels of their organic certification. However, Abbie is an anomaly; Corse Farm Dairy is going to be one of two family dairy farms in Vermont owned and operated by a female. This is both exciting and terrifying, but she is determined to at least try to make it work. Her love for farming and desire to build coalitions and serve the broader agriculture community has manifested in positions on VHCB's Farm & Forest Viability Advisory Board and the board of NOFA-VT.

What does the future bring the Corse Farm Dairy? First and foremost is the juggling of the 26 landlords across the 375 acres they manage. Some of this land they rent, other land they have managed for 30+ years with a shake of a hand. They must approach this with grace and eloquence and manage many situations that could jeopardize their pasture, hay fields, and farm all while ensuring the land is managed effectively for Organic Valley standards. Only time will tell what happens but Abbie and Leon are optimistic about the future of this land. The future of this dairy farm is squarely in Abbie's hands as she will be taking control of the operation as her father ages. Leon does not want to retire and Abbie is in no rush for him to stop, but all three family members are excited to work towards building a viable future for the farm that Abbie will eventually manage.

**Meet the
CORSE FAMILY**
at the Co-op on
**Saturday, October 5th &
Saturday, October 19th**
from 11:30am-1:30pm.

