

STRAFFORD ORGANIC CREAMERY
AT ROCK BOTTOM FARM



Strafford Organic Creamery

Producer OF THE *Month*

JULY 2020



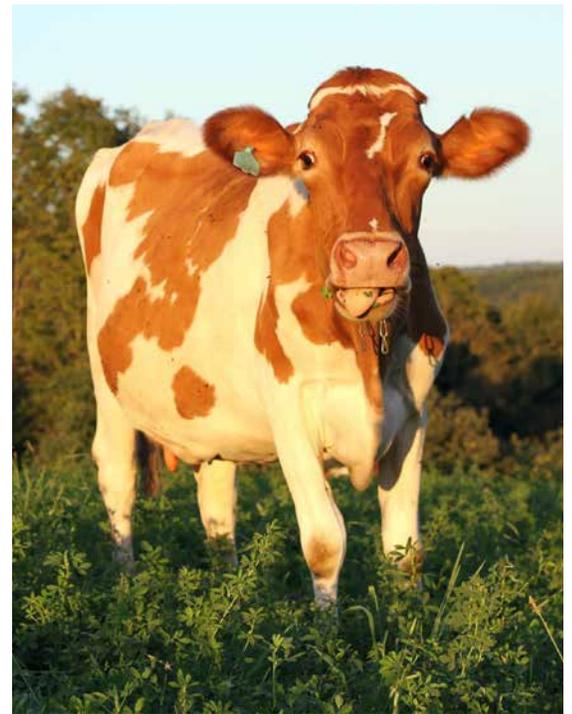
BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE *Month*

by Jon Megas-Russell



Photo by John Dillon and VPR.



The dairy industry in Vermont is a true economic, agricultural and land management force. Yes, that's right the dairy industry employs thousands of people, generates billions of dollars in revenue and manages nearly 80% of Vermont's farmland. The Strafford Organic Creamery, on Rockbottom Farm in Strafford, Vermont, is a key contributor to this industry. Owners Earl Ransom and Amy Huyffer manage over 1,000 acres of land and make some of the highest quality organic milk and ice cream in our state. They milk seventy Guernsey cows and take deep pride in operating an organic, pesticide- and chemical-free farm.

Rockbottom Farm began as a commune in the 1960s. It slowly converted to a working farm where Earl's father grew vegetables, made maple syrup, and milked a few cows. Earl was born and raised on the farm, but spent time in Iowa,

California and Michigan before coming back to Vermont full-time after college. Earl raised beef cows at first, and then purchased his own herd of Guernsey milking cows, immediately transitioning them to organic management. He sold the milk to The Organic Cow of Vermont, which was still bottling in Chelsea, VT at that time.

Earl met his wife Amy at a local bar in 1998 and they fell in love. They have raised four sons on Rockbottom Farm, all of whom work on the farm and have been milking and driving tractors since they were 9. The family are all big sports fans and even put on a 2-on-2 basketball tournament with their family and farm crew during April as a way to have some fun during the near-total quarantine for COVID-19.

So why do they raise Guernsey cows over another breed? It dates back to Earl's father and his experiments with raising all sorts of cows

including Jersey, Holstein and Guernsey. He found that Jersey cows are cute but have an attitude problem, and while Holsteins produce lots of milk, they don't have much personality. Guernsey cows came to be the favorite because they have a gentle disposition, thoughtful character, and produce the highest quality milk when fed a predominantly grass diet. On a diet of mostly grass, the herd of Guernseys produces milk that has a higher fat content and more complex flavor than milk from other breeds. Guernsey milk's deep yellow color, high omega-3's and nutrient density are especially great for ice cream. Everything Earl and Amy do on the farm is to support the well-being and health of the cows and ensure the highest quality milk.

Between Rockbottom Farm and leased land nearby, they grow crops and graze about 1,000 acres. Grass is their most abundant crop to properly support the needs of the

Strafford Organic Creamery



herd. However, they do grow some corn for silage, which provides extra energy for the cows in the cold winter months. In the grazing season (early May through October), the cows are out on pasture for all but the time it takes to milk them. Every 12 hours, the milking cows move to a new paddock of fresh grass on the rotational grazing system. There are 52 pastures, which gives each piece 26 days of regrowth before it's grazed again.

In addition to grazing, organic management also means that cows eat only certified organic feed, which must be grown without pesticides, herbicides, or chemical fertilizers. The cows are kept healthy without antibiotics or artificial hormones, which is easy to do with high-quality feed, comfortable conditions, and lots of sunshine and fresh grass.

One of the interesting things I learned from my conversation

with Amy was about cow fertility and how important it is to the health and well-being of a farm. If the herd's average birthing cycle stretches out more than 14 to 15 months, it tips the scale on long-term economic sustainability. Amy explained that cows are like marathon runners and need very careful nutrition to maintain body condition and fertility. One of the integral components to keeping their cows fertile is supplementing their diet with a small amount of organic grain. Amy and Earl buy their grain from Morrison's Custom Feeds in Barnet, VT, a family-owned business. Additionally, nutrients that leave the farm in the form of milk and cream need to be replaced to maintain soil health, which happens either in the form of fertilizers spread by tractors, or by additional nutrition for the cows, which they spread themselves in their manure.

Aside from milking, which they share equally, Earl handles more of the farm operations and field and tractor work while Amy manages the creamery and the breeding program. They employ five people in the creamery and two people on the farm. The farm staff lives right on the farm in another house and apartment, which has been very helpful during the pandemic to minimize exposure to the outside world. They also made a decision early on that everyone that works on the farm would be one big family unit (also known as a "quarantine pod"), but the creamery crew wears masks and washes their hands more than 40 times a day anyway. They've heard stories of other dairy facilities being hit by the pandemic, and they have so far been able to avoid any issues due to the care they have taken with their family and staff. The other big realization that has come since the pandemic is how much milk and ice



cream are truly essential items for one's diet. Over the past few months the market for dairy and ice cream has gotten stronger and sales have been robust.

Strafford offer a full line of milk and ice cream to co-ops and independent stores across Vermont and New Hampshire. The most important piece of production in their creamery is cleanliness and food safety, which their staff focuses on with a deep attention to detail. Amy loves their strawberry ice cream, and remembers nights of processing local strawberries over the years, preferably late at night during a Red Sox game. Many other flavors such as Vanilla, Chocolate, Chocolate Coconut, Ginger and Smooth Maple are all Co-op favorites. They hand-pick ingredients whenever possible, brew fresh-ground coffee, hand separate eggs and select only organic ingredients to make the best ice cream imaginable. They also offer a full line of glass-bottled milk including skim, 1%, 2%, whole, chocolate, and old-fashioned cream-line milk. The milk is HTST pasteurized (high temperature, short time) to best preserve its fresh flavor and texture. Look for their ice cream and milk every day in our dairy coolers and please remember to bring back your glass bottles to obtain your deposit and keep the Strafford Organic

Creamery stocked with bottles to refill. It is also excellent to note that they deliver direct from their farm to your Brattleboro Food Co-op.

Amy and Earl are exactly where they want to be and doing what they want to with their life. At times it feels like a total escape from the world by living on cow time, and it helps bring them a deep sense of being in the moment. As a team, the folks at Rockbottom Farm find that they're happy when the cows are happy. They don't get off the farm much, but that suits them pretty well.

Farm work also suits their 17-year-old son, Jackson, who thinks he'd like to take over the farm when his parents retire. Remote learning has been a great match for Jackson, who was enrolled in one academic literature class and a half-day Diversified Agriculture program when school

closed. He was able to read and write in the evenings and work full days on the farm for credit. He likes all aspects of the work, especially driving tractors and milking cows, always with the music cranked up and a cold chocolate milk or can of Moxie nearby.

Amy and Earl feel the future is bright for them. They are happy exactly where they are, and with increasing efficiencies and farm experience the farm work becomes a little more profitable and easier to manage, at least most days. They love knowing that their products are on 3,000 breakfast tables every morning and they take a lot of pride in feeding people nutritious food and desert. Seeing the sunrise and sunset nearly every day reminds them how lucky they are to farm in such a gorgeous place. They also see that with a robust market in Vermont, New Hampshire and some sales direct to the Boston area they have no signs of slowing down. There could be new flavors for ice cream in the future, but their core focus right now is reliably delivering their wonderful dairy products to independent food stores and co-ops. We ask that you try one of their delicious offerings throughout the month of July and beyond—you will smile with every sip of milk or taste of ice cream.

