



ECHO FARM



Hinsdale, NH

Producer OF THE *Month*

OCTOBER 2020



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer ^{OF} ^{THE} Month

by Jon Megas-Russell

Echo Farm



October is National Co-op Month, and each year we choose to highlight a co-op that is locally owned and sold right here at your Brattleboro Food Co-op. Cabot Cooperative offers a unique and important representation of how co-ops can be locally owned by farms yet support production of nationally popular products. One owner of Cabot Cooperative is Hinsdale, NH-based Echo Farm. From supplying milk for Cabot products, to sitting on committees, to supporting the marketing and outreach of Cabot Cooperative, this female-run farm is proud of their contributions. In addition to supplying milk to Cabot, they proudly hand-made puddings that they sell all over the Northeast at co-ops and natural foods stores. And though they are a small farm at merely 35 acres and 70 cows, their early adoption of cutting-edge humane animal husbandry technology and protocols have made them leaders in their field.

Beth and Courtney Hodge have been living and working on Echo Farm since the 1990's when their parents purchased the farm and relocated the family from Connecticut.

Both of them were involved with 4H as children, and grew up with a keen interest in horses and cows. They both attended Cornell University and Beth worked towards an animal science degree with no desire to ever milk a cow. Courtney focused on the dairy industry with classes in food marketing and the grocery store industry. As the farm became more of a focus, their parents fell in love with the cows and the idea of starting a farm. They remember that it all started when their mom, Bonnie, uttered the famous words...“I think it would be fun to milk a cow.” By 1997 Beth and Courtney had either graduated from Cornell University college or were close to completion. During their summers off in college they began to research a unique product line that

could be produced at the farm and support the farm beyond just selling their milk. Their dad, Bob, was the one who pushed for creating a value-added product and really pushed for pudding. They did take a hard look at flavored milks and cheese before settling on pudding as the path forward for creating a financially sustainable farm. Over the course of many years they worked up to having sixty dairy cows, but it all started with one cow in their garage named Ticket. Prior to, during, and after college a lot of work was done to create a dairy farm and pudding business. Beth and Courtney could not stress enough that the Schofield Family and her parents were integral in starting the farm, growing the business, and launching the pudding line. They both have tons of gratitude for their father, in particular, who was the visionary and planner of their expansions and movement to the point they are at today. Now in 2020 they have seventy Jersey and Milking Shorthorn cows.

Both Beth and Courtney are deeply committed to the health and well-being of their herd of cows. Thus, they have made the choice to focus on their farm being Certified



Beth and Courtney Hodge



Humane. In fact, they were the first dairy farm in the country to do so. This certification illustrates a focus on the well-being of the cows, including a focus on spacing in barns and access to the outdoors. The certification requires that high standards be met in the overall handling of their cows throughout their lives, and, of course, education and training for the team to ensure they are caring for the herd in the right manner. Their animals are free to move around and are not confined inside, and spend a large proportion of their time outdoors. In addition to grass, they must feed their cows a quality grain feed, without animal by-products, antibiotics, or growth hormones. Because the cows are fed and cared for in a proper manner Beth and Courtney know that the milk production, life span, and happiness of their cows exceed those at many other farms. They like to say, "our girls have names, not numbers." They know about each of the cows' personalities and who their family members are.

Speaking of a great life for the cows, Echo Farm operates a Lely robot milking system. They were only the second dairy farm in New Hampshire to install such a machine, and it was done first and foremost for its health benefits for their herd.

Beth and niece Honor starting the Lely



Specifically, the cows can choose when they are milked and when they eat grain, and their health is monitored by technology gathered during the milking process. The data can specifically monitor milk production and key indicators of a cow's health. This allows them to keep an eye on when a cow may be getting sick and address it before it gets too far along. Proactivity with the health of a herd allows for less use of medication, happier cows, higher quality milk, and less concerns around spread of sickness within a herd. Overall, cows self-select to milk about three times a day compared to the two typical times when this same process is done by hand. This milking machine also allows Echo Farm to be much more efficient by requiring less staff hours to milk, allowing them to allocate more time to puddling

production, in-store sampling, farm cleanliness/operations, and sometimes taking a vacation. As an early adopter of this technology they required help during implementation. A field representative from Cabot worked as a liaison from the farm to the state to ensure they complied with protocols while setting new state standards when necessary. Overall, the Lely allows Echo Farm to have more milk in their tanks, support for their Certified Humane protocols, optimal barn design and of course an amazing herd of happy cows.

Echo Farm's relationship with Cabot/Agri-Mark started in 1997, when they first began milking their cows and needed an outlet to sell their milk. They decided on becoming owners in the Cabot/Agri-Mark cooperative because this cooperative allowed them to both sell their milk and to produce their own value-added products as well, which is not the case with all dairy co-ops. An additional incentive was all of the support Cabot was willing to put forward regarding farm operations and marketing. Cabot was integral in getting the robotic Lely milking machine installed and running. They also have provided extensive marketing support, from photos and resources to shared promos and sampling programs

in-store. Cabot and Echo Farm even partnered on some cheese/pudding in-store samplings while handing out coupons. Beth also supports the strategy and oversight within Cabot by sitting on two different committees. One sets standards for the treatment of cows within all of their farms and how farmers interact with milking, grazing, veterinarian relationships and beyond. The other committee looks at ways to tell stories about those farms that have programs and practices in place that are exemplary in regards to the health and well-being of all creatures and land that are a part of their farms.

Oftentimes people don't realize that Cabot is a cooperative that includes Agri-Mark, so we wanted to share a bit of background about what this entails. As Agri-Mark explains, their rich tradition as a cooperative dates back to 1916, with the formation of its predecessor, the New England Milk Producers Association. The cooperative flourished during the twentieth century and in 1980 became Agri-Mark. A dozen years later Agri-Mark merged with Cabot Creamery Cooperative, thereby ensuring that Northeast dairy farmers would continue their ownership of a valuable, time-honored consumer brand—Cabot. There are now 791 farms in New England and New York that are owners of the cooperative. Only a few years ago there were nearly 1,200 farm owners, but as milk prices drop and farming becomes more expensive smaller farms continue to lose their viability. Cabot is the portion of the cooperative that takes the milk and creates a large amount of value-added dairy products from cheese to sour cream to yogurt and beyond. The remainder of the milk is then taken by Agri-Mark and sold off for products such as drinkable milk and whey products. Cabot and



Agri-Mark create the majority of their products in Middlebury, VT; Chateaugay, NY; and West Springfield, MA.

So why did they choose pudding as their preferred product to make? Beth and Courtney stated that as they looked around the industry in the late 90s, they saw that, locally, Cabot was making cheese, Ben & Jerry's ice cream, and glass bottle milk with McNamara, but no one was making a high-quality pudding. While on the surface pudding may seem like a simple dessert with only a few basic ingredients, it takes a great deal of detail and skill to do it right. It would be easy to use a lot of sugar and stabilizers, but Echo Farm has avoided carrageenan and in turn uses less sugar. The shelf life on their product is not that of a cheese so they must constantly make fresh batches to ship out. They can make upwards of 2,400 pounds of pudding at one time now. Their top seller here at the Co-op is chocolate, and coffee caramel is their personal favorite, but that flavor is only being produced in small batches for farm stands. Their first batches of pudding were sold to stores such as your Brattleboro Food Co-op and Gomarlo's in Swanzey, NH as well as farm stands. While they work with large distributors to reach natural food stores and co-ops across the

northeast, they have found a sweet spot with small farm stands. This happened during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when sales were stellar but due to supply chain issues, they had a hard time securing packaging to produce more pudding for stores such as the Co-op. This challenge made them pivot towards trying some new packaging and new flavors that could only be sold at farm stands. Overall, this experiment went well and creating new flavors was a blessing that allowed them to go back to their origins of selling to only the smallest farm stands and stores. It has given them new inspiration, and they are excited about the possibility of integrating these new flavors into local distribution via Food Connects.

What does the future hold? They want to continue to grow their pudding sales while maintaining their milk production for Cabot/Agri-Mark. The first task that must happen for the next stage of growth is to build a new website complete with fresh photos and stories. Following that enhancement, they must overhaul their packaging to freshen it and make it more representative of their farm, family, and story. Next, they want to grow the space in which they make pudding on their farm, which would allow them to increase production, create new flavors, and ensure they can keep all of their customers stocked. With growth would come job creation, but as they said on the phone they are "not seeking world domination," just steady growth to ensure the long-term viability of their farm.

Add Echo Farm pudding to your next shopping trip either in store or through our Curbside Pickup program, <https://www.brattleboro-foodcoop.coop/shop/curbside/>. And don't forget the Cabot Whipped Cream!!! 