

## Livestock



**CONVENIENT:** The cheesemaking facility and sales room at Blue Jacket Dairy is attached to Jim and Angel King's home.

# Finding a future in cheese

By GAIL C. KECK

**D**URING an interview with Angel King in her Blue Jacket Dairy salesroom, her customers tell a good part of her story. One pair enthusiastically samples almost everything she offers. Another man lists all the friends he's told about the dairy's farmstead cheese. Another couple says they heard about the dairy and had to check it out for themselves. Then there's a toddler tugging on Angel's white coat, asking for some fried cheese. He's not exactly a customer, though. Caleb is the youngest of eight children in the King family, all of whom have been involved in the family dairy businesses. "The best thing is that we get to do it as a family," says Angel.

Angel's husband, Jim, is a fourth-generation dairy farmer. He continues to run the family's

### Key Points

- Dairy farm family adds value to milk by making cheese.
- Cheese business capitalizes on family involvement.
- Farmers markets, specialty groceries provide sales outlets.

55-cow dairy near Bellefontaine, while Angel manages the cheesemaking business they started last April. Preschoolers Caleb and Grace help out by sticking labels on cheese packages. Jonathan, 13, helps his dad with farming and 17-year-old Katie makes cheese. Four adult children no longer live at home, but Matt and Andrew pitched in to help build the cheese facilities, and Holly and Stacey have helped with farmers markets in the summer.

### Abundant outlets

The Kings also rely on full-



**START EARLY:** Young cheesemaker Grace King watches Blue Jacket Dairy employee Kristin Strebig mix some quark.

time and part-time employees to help with the new cheese business, especially during the summer when they sell through farmers markets. Last summer they sold at 10 markets each week, and this year they hope to expand to 15 or more.

They've also been selling their cheese through specialty groceries, including Jungle Jim's in Cincinnati, the Raisin Rack in Westerville and Whole Foods in Cincinnati, Dublin, Mason and Upper Arlington. They sell cheese from the salesroom at the dairy and from their Web site as well.

The cheesemaking facility and salesroom is attached to the Kings' home, which lets

Angel handle household work during breaks in cheesemaking.

"Making cheese is a hurry up and wait type of thing," she explains. The location is also closer to the road and more visible to customers than it would have been if they had built the facilities next to their dairy barns.

The business side of the cheese enterprise draws on Angel's previous experience as manager of an Internet company. She was already familiar with handling recordkeeping, payroll and employees. "I love the fact that the skills I have get to be used," she says. Angel also brought her lifelong appreciation for good cheese to the

## Local ties

**B**LUE Jacket Dairy's marketing efforts focus on consumers' interest in local foods. "The local movement is growing tremendously," explains Angel King. They link their dairy and their cheeses to their area by choosing names that reflect local history.

The dairy takes its name from the Shawnee war chief Blue Jacket, who signed the Treaty of Greenville, ending the Indian Wars in Ohio. Blue Jacket Creek also runs through their farm.

The cheeses they're making include Gretna Grillin', a halloumi-style cheese named for a nearby hamlet; Sure Shot Garlic, a German-style quark named for Annie Oakley; and Ribbon-rail Roulade, chevre flavored with chives and garlic named in recognition of local railroad history.

Ohio was once much more prominent in the nation as a cheesemaking state, Angel points out. She'd like to see more producers making a wider variety of cheeses in Ohio again. "There's plenty of room for cheesemakers in this state."

■ For more go to [www.bluejacketdairy.com](http://www.bluejacketdairy.com).

business. Her grandfather was a cheese lover, she explains, and he regularly introduced her to unfamiliar cheeses. The cheese business combines her skills in business and interest in cheese with Jim's skills as a dairy farmer, she explains. "It was a marriage of our backgrounds."

### Better return

Marketing milk as cheese is also a way to diversify farm income and earn a better return from the milk, Angel adds. "You really notice that with the depressed milk prices we have now."

Jim still sells Grade A milk through his local milk co-op, but they have an arrangement that allows them to draw off whatever they need for cheese. They also buy goat milk from a group of nearby Amish farmers to make chevre (goat milk cheese).

The cheese they make from their own milk is classified as farmstead cheese, meaning the cheese is made on the farm where the milk originated. The goat milk cheese is considered artisan cheese, meaning it is made in a traditional manner in small batches. They are currently producing both fresh and aged cheeses, but their first batch of aged cheese won't be ready until this summer.

Keck writes from Raymond.

## Making cheese takes a plan

**B**EFORE the Kings launched their Blue Jacket cheese enterprise, they spent two years doing research and planning. Angel experimented with various cheeses in her own kitchen, took a cheesemaking course and researched marketing options. They also studied the regulatory requirements for farmstead and artisan cheese production.

Anyone who sells Grade A milk is already familiar with regulations and inspections, but making and selling cheese adds a few more layers of requirements. "You can't just make cheese in your kitchen and sell it at a farmers market," explains Angel.

Her cheesemaking facilities and salesroom must meet Ohio Department of Agriculture standards and receive monthly inspections. Local health departments also regulate sales at farm markets because cheese is a "potentially hazardous food." She sees regulatory officials as allies in preventing problems. "It's not an adversarial relationship at all."