

NewsWatch

Craigs discover greener pastures

By HARLEY BUCHHOLZ

THE power of the green, growing grass cannot be overestimated," says a brochure telling about the pasture-raised products — meat, milk and eggs — available at Grassway Organics Farm Store.

Kay and Wayne Craig milk Jersey and crossbred cows and raise Jersey beef, hogs, turkeys and chickens for meat and eggs on The Grassway Farm, 200-plus acres of pastureland in southeastern Calumet County. Their farm production and wholesale purchases — all raised or produced organically — supply the store they opened a year and a half ago. The store was "such a natural extension" of their decision to practice grazing and produce organic products, Kay says.

Following their dream

The couple left 8-to-5 agribusiness jobs to follow a dream of returning to their dairy farm roots. Both are dairy science graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and have backgrounds in farm credit. Kay went on to get a master's degree in food business and worked in the food industry before the couple located a farm.

They wanted contiguous land for grazing purposes, Kay explains. They found that in the New Holstein-Kiel area: 247 acres, with a 42-stall stanchion barn. They had a plan after Kay attended a women's conference on sustainable agriculture and heard a speaker praise grazing and organic production. She came back enthused, and Wayne says they did a lot of research, took part in several pasture walks and learned a great deal from other organic farmers. He laments that little expertise is available from conventional education sources. "The experts are still catching up," he maintains.

The Craigs bought their farm and

Key Points

- The Craigs left ag careers for farming thirteen years ago.
- The couple opened an organic farm store near New Holstein.
- They sell most of their milk to Organic Valley Cooperative.

its 206 tillable acres in 1993 and began working toward growing organically. However, it wasn't until 2004 that they were finally certified as a fully organic farm. "If it was easy, everybody would do it," laughs Kay. "There's a tremendous amount of paperwork."

Preparation is expensive, too. Wayne points out that it cost \$10,000 to construct a perimeter fence around the farm. Gravel lanes had to be laid to reach the 5- and 10-acre plots they mapped out for fencing into smaller grazing sites. While there's no great investment in buildings and machinery, there are the costs of water lines to all corners, organic feed to supplement grass and the baleage and hay the Craigs put up and sometimes buy for winter feeding, and a walk-in freezer for the store.

Starting with the dairy herd that came with the farm, the Craigs slowly began crossbreeding to Jersey and Brown Swiss and now have settled on a herd that's about three-fourths Jersey. They find the smaller animals better suited to the grazing practice. They also converted to seasonal breeding so calving takes place from about March 20 to late May.

"We want cows to calve and have their highest nutrition needs met when the grass is growing rapidly," Kay explains. Wayne adds that by Thanksgiving they are able to follow a once-a-day milking schedule. They usually maintain about 100 cows, although in the spring they sold 30 bred heifers and dropped to 75 cows over summer.

Graziers lead more satisfied lives

KAY and Wayne Craig are enthused about grazing and happy with its results. That's in keeping with a new University of Wisconsin-Madison study that found graziers to be more satisfied with their quality of life.

The study results are covered in a report, "Grazing in the Dairy State," published in January by Jennifer Taylor of the UW Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems and Jeremy Foltz of the UW Program on Agricultural Technology Studies. Among the findings of the study conducted between 1993 and 2003:

- Graziers make more money per cow, have less debt and are more satisfied with their overall quality of life than other dairy farmers.
- Graziers tend to have fewer cows and are less likely to hire nonfarm labor.
- Managed grazing was practiced on about 23% of Wisconsin dairy farms in 2003.

Grassway Organics Farm Store builds loyal customers

CUSTOMERS come from all over eastern Wisconsin to the Grassway Organics Farm Store. Wayne and Kay Craig advertise on the Internet and in a local shopper but acknowledge most advertising is word of mouth. A decision to host this year's Calumet County "Sunday on the Farm" event, which drew 1,500 visitors, was a big boost to business.

All of the meat and eggs raised on the Craigs' Grassway Farm are sold through their store. Two area butcher shops handle slaughtering and packaging the meat. The job of cleaning eggs falls to the Craigs' 8-year-old son, Rudy. Two employees split farm and store chores, and there is a part-time milker. Milk that doesn't sell direct is shipped



WAYNE AND Kay Craig and their son, Rudy, welcome guests to their Grassway Organics Farm Store just outside of New Holstein.

"But I have 40 bred heifers to come in," Wayne says, so the herd will be back to full numbers by the next calving season. He uses New Zealand genetics — "grass-based semen" — for breeding and hires an inseminator during the 25-day cycle when he says he's able to breed 95% of his cows. The herd has a 65% first-service conception rate, and they're aiming to top 70%.

"We select for high fertility," Kay explains. Herd production is about 12,000 pounds of milk with a butterfat content up to 5%. "We're not pushing high production. We don't feed a lot of grain."

More than cows

Out of the dairy herd the Craigs started raising a few Jersey steers. Then they started some laying hens. Meat chickens came next and were an immediate hit.

"The first three years we never got a chicken of our own to eat," Kay says. Hogs followed, and then turkeys. They've all been welcomed by customers. This year the Craigs have 26 Jersey beef for fall butchering, 20 mixed-breed hogs bought as feeder pigs and raised organically since, 100 turkeys, 1,300 Rock-Cornish cross chickens for meat — brought to 5-pound carcass weight in eight weeks — 200 Red Star pullets destined to be the next laying hens, plus Rhode Island Red and Barred Rock as current layers. The current batch of hogs did not adapt to grazing, but otherwise "we move everybody every day" to fresh pasture, Kay says.

With the dry weather this year and in 2005, the farm is facing some hard times. Wayne says he is considering downsizing the dairy herd.

"We need to have the farm produce all the forage we need," he says. "We may come out better with a smaller

herd. Buying organic feed is expensive. ... We need an organic feed mill on this side of the state. There are only four feed mills that are organic, and they're all on the west side."

Overall, though, he believes grazing is less labor intensive than other farming methods. Plus, Kay adds, "The cows are so much healthier. ... We just don't have feet and leg problems."

The future, the Craigs think, will see more emphasis on the store and marketing. The farm is about where they want it, though they're considering more beef along with downsizing the dairy herd. "I think we're maxed out on chickens," Kay laughs.

Buchholz writes from Fond du Lac.

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to Organic Valley Cooperative at LaFarge. To meet state regulations, consumers bring their own containers for milk. They're also required to buy a one-time \$10 "farm share" to comply with the laws dealing with raw milk.

Read more about The Grassway Farm and Grassway Organics Farm Store at www.grasswayorganics.com