

# Specialty markets create opportunities

By JENNIFER VINCENT

**T**O find your place, sometimes you have to invent it.

The Meerman family farm in Coopersville established itself 127 years ago. But, it was in the last 12 years that it changed dramatically, adopting new management strategies and developing new niche markets to provide for future generations.

The third generation of Meermans, Steve and Sue, took ownership of the farm in 1972 while raising their family, which now includes three sons and two daughters.

Most farmers would be thrilled to have children wanting to carry on the farming tradition, but while the Meermans were happy, it posed some serious challenges as to how to accommodate all three sons that wanted to stay on the farm full time.

The Meerman farm, formerly called Steve-N-Sons and now Grassfields Dairy, is still a small dairy operation. But today, the dynamics of the farm have changed considerably.

To add their oldest son, Luke, as a partner, the farm began a transition starting in the early '90s. "We started adding cows, growing from about 80 to 120, and putting them on pasture versus the conventional system we were using," Luke says. "We were looking for ways to lower our inputs, and frankly, we were just tired of spending all our time in the barn. It's better for the cows, too."

In 1994, they switched to seasonal calving, while adding more cows.

## Key Points

- Meerman family farm became a grass-fed dairy to capitalize on the niche market.
- Brothers adopt management strategies to create a partnership on the farm.
- Raw, organic milk is used to make aged cheese sold at the farm, retail outlets.

"It fit well with the grazing system, calving only in April, May and June," explains Jesse, the middle son. "It simplified everything, saved input costs and allowed the calves to get big enough to out-winter. It also gave us time off from calving and milking, and allowed the animals to utilize fresh forages when they need it most."

## Working through difficulties

Even as Steve faced life's greatest hurdle, a diagnosis of cancer in 1997, he remained focused and encouraged his children to look for new ways of creating opportunities on the farm.

The changes they already had made allowed Luke to join his father as a partner to form a limited liability company in 1998. At that time, Jesse and the youngest son, Jay, were looking to invent their own place on the farm.

Jay began raising pastured chickens for both meat and eggs.

Jesse looked at adding value to the milk that was transitioning to organic. He spent many hours researching the art of cheese making.

In 2002 Jesse became a partner in the company and invested \$35,000 to

purchase equipment and build a cheese shop and farm store.

Because it rests for at least two months, aged cheese can be produced with raw milk. To ensure it's safe, random samples are tested by the state.

"Many people seek out the health benefits of raw milk produced from grass-fed cows," Jesse says. "This was a way to add even more value to that product. And, even if I didn't have a market for it right away, aged cheese only appreciates in value."

In 2005, the farm went a step further by providing access to raw milk through a cow-share program. (See story below.)

## Organic goal

While the farm was able to market its cows as grass-fed and free of antibiotics, steroids, hormones or chemicals, it wasn't until 2007 when it gained official certification through the Global Organic Alliance.

About 40 cows are used to fill the cheese and cow-share needs, while the remaining cows' milk is shipped through Dairy Farmers of America to Virginia,



**FROM THE FARM:** The Meerman family sells their cheeses, eggs and meat cuts from a farm store and at the Holland Farmers Market. The other 70% is sold wholesale, largely marketed by Gourmet Specialty Foods. Cheese prices range from \$7.50 to \$10.50 per pound. See [www.grassfieldscheese.com/retail-stores.html](http://www.grassfieldscheese.com/retail-stores.html) for a complete listing of retail outlets.

where it is sold as organic.

"There's a tremendous amount of paperwork and everything has to be documented to be organic," Luke says. "We are inspected yearly and have to produce the records to show we are supplying only organic feed."

Sue says Steve recognized the premiums that a pastured, organic herd

## Investing in a cow

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**A**GED cheese was one way to sell raw milk indirectly right from the Grassfields Dairy farm. However, it is illegal in Michigan to sell raw, unpasteurized milk.

The only way to have access to raw milk is if you own the cow. So, in the spring of 2005, Jesse Meerman and his wife, Betsy, started a separate enterprise, Green Pastures LLC, which sells cow shares. Those purchasing a cow share(s) actually become part owners of a cow, thus allowing direct access to the raw milk their cow produces.

Cow-share contracts are not illegal in Michigan and are growing in popularity across the state.

The state regularly inspects the farm. "We also send a sample of milk at the first of the month to check for *E. coli*, *Listeria*, *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*," Betsy says. "We have never had a positive test. Cows are also tested weekly for mastitis and treated with herbs, homeopathy, tinctures, prayer and vitamins if she tests positive."

## How it works

For a determined price, depending on how much milk is wanted each week, a consumer purchases a share in a milk cow or dairy herd. The farmer and the consumer then enter into a contract for a set weekly or monthly fee for the farmer

to provide feed, board and care for the animal, as well as the milking labor and storage. The consumer gets access to a determined quantity of cow's milk.

At Green Pastures, the purchase price for one share is a one-time cost of \$200 or \$100 for a half share. The purchase price, minus a 25% administrative fee, is refundable if it is sold to a new buyer. The monthly fee for cow care and maintenance is \$50 per share or \$28 for a half share.

One share entitles an owner to an average of 3 gallons of milk per week for the 10 months of lactation (April to February). "There will be more in the spring and then gradually decrease to 2.5 or 2 gallons per week towards winter," Betsy says. A half share entitles the owner to an average of 1.5 gallons a week. Cow-share owners must bring their own containers or buy them from Green Pastures. "They fill their own half-gallon glass jars from a separate bulk tank from the rest of the farm."

One cow equals 10 shares, and Green Pastures has about 120 families with shares in 10 cows.

For more about Green Pastures, visit [www.migreenpastures.com/index.html](http://www.migreenpastures.com/index.html) or call 616-997-1306.

For more information about raw milk and milk pasteurization, visit [www.cfsan.fda.gov](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov) or call toll-free at 888-INFO-FDA. Information is also available at [www.westonaprice.org](http://www.westonaprice.org).



**FAMILY BUSINESS:** Steve-N-Sons farm, which now goes just by Grassfields Dairy, has adopted management practices and marketing strategies to allow for Sue Meerman's three sons, Luke, Jesse and Jay, to form a partnership. Sue's daughters, Bonnie Esther and Heidi Parcher, also work part time on the farm. Standing (from left) are Luke, holding future adoptee Kennett; Chaeli Eno, Jay's girlfriend; Jay; Sue; Jesse, holding daughter Katie; and Betsy, Jessie's wife, holding daughter Sophia. In front are Vicky, Luke's wife, and Bonnie.