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Cheese Talk

A few months ago I wrote a blog for our website stating that, had my life taken a different path, I would now be vegan. Admittedly it’s a strange statement for a dairy farmer to make, so the blog gathered a lot of attention on social media, but I stand by it.

Farming was something I married into. Over the past 25 years our family-sized dairy farm in south west Scotland has changed dramatically. We moved from conventional farming to organic, then simultaneously diversified into ice cream production and tourism with Cream o’ Galloway. But it’s been a more recent change to the way we farm that has attracted attention and controversy.

Opening our dairy farm to families every day had shown us how disconnected people have become from farming. “Why do you separate the calves from their mum?” was the most frequently asked question on our farm tours, which prompted us to ask ourselves, what would happen if we didn’t?

We did huge amounts of research and ten years ago we built a new dairy, designed so that cows and calves could stay together. We had a disastrous pilot five years ago that nearly bankrupted us, but it taught us a great deal. Three years ago we gave it another go and became Europe’s largest cow with calf dairy farm. Has it been easy? No. Has it been worth it? Absolutely.

On most dairy farms calves and cows are separated within a day or two of birth; on our farm calves stay with their mum to suckle naturally for 5-6 months. They’re together 24 hours a day for the first 8 weeks and are then gradually separated overnight where they can still see and call to each other but not suckle – almost like a separate bedroom.

In total the calf drinks around a third of the milk, but what we lose in milk volume we gain in other benefits. Most noticeably the cows are calmer and healthier, the calves grow twice as fast and our less intensive, ecological approach to farming is delivering multiple environmental benefits.

Ultimately what we are trying to do is create a circular, regenerative farming system that has a positive environmental impact, delivers nutritious food, provides good quality jobs and works to the highest possible standards of animal welfare.

We launched our artisan cheese brand, The Ethical Dairy, last spring and we’ve been amazed at the strength of reaction. Many people have embraced what we are doing and we have been inundated with messages of support. Demand for our products was so high that we accelerated plans to build a bigger cheese dairy. This is now completed and two months ago we quadrupled production.

As well as vocal supporters, there have been some vocal critics. We always knew we’d get a backlash from those in the farming industry who favour a more intensive approach. Food production and farming are complex, highly politicised topics with huge vested interests – doing things differently will inevitably attract comments.

Coincidentally, we launched our cheese range at a time when interest in vegan diets is surging, and we have had several waves of attacks on social media from vegan activists. However, vegans have also been some of our strongest supporters. Around 20% of contributors to our crowdfunding campaign last year were vegan or near-vegan, and we have regular orders from vegans buying our cheese for partners or children.

People want to know they’re making positive choices in the food they buy for themselves and for family members. The more that farmers and food producers speak directly with members of the public, the more we become empowered to understand and address the concerns people have with conventional methods of food production.

I will never criticise anyone for being vegan. With the information that’s been in the media over the past couple of years adopting a vegan lifestyle is a sign of concerned citizens wanting to make a difference. It is our duty as an industry to address those concerns and provide information and produce that people can feel good about.

Wilma Finlay