

The Progressive Farmer More Money From Milk

By making cheese and adding value, one dairyman sets his own price for the milk he makes.
By Joe Link



Photos: Joe Link

The 1980s were not very encouraging years for young American farmers, and Kenny Mattingly was just one of thousands.

It was during this time Kenny faced the fact that the family's dairy farm in Barren County, Kentucky, could not support both him and his parents, so he went to work for a farm lobbying group. But with the work came travel—and a way to see farming from a different perspective.

On his first trip to Europe, he witnessed dairies with just 30 cows. And the farmers, though not rich, said they were doing just fine.

"When I came back from Holland, I told Dad, 'You know what they do with their milk? They make cheese!'" Kenny recalls.

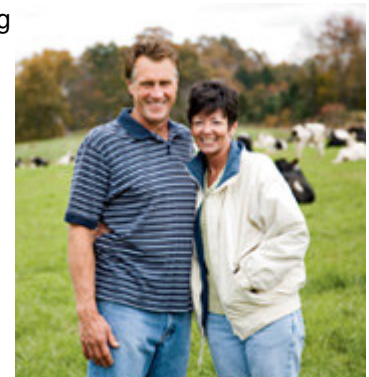
He was amazed to find the dairy farmers themselves—not the markets—set the prices for their cheeses. It all made sense to the young man who believed in small family farms. He began to think that becoming a dairy farmer again wasn't out of the question.

Today, Kenny and his wife, Beverly, run a farm that still milks cows—hard, long hours by any measure. But their real business plan is to make and market some of the finest gourmet cheeses in Mid-America.

Indeed, the operation is moving in the opposite direction of most dairies: a major reduction in herd size, vastly reduced grain needs and a herd full of breeds rarely found in the U.S.

Kenny returned to the farm in 1993 and bought some bred heifers from his father. "I kept asking myself, 'How can I go back in this business but do it differently?'"

After much research, the Mattinglys bought some used cheese-making equipment in 1998 and started making 4,000 pounds of gouda cheese.



Kenny and Beverly Mattingly soon will reduce their herd size and make their farm certified organic.

Then came marketing—"door to door, face to face," recalls Beverly. "We would take a weekend, pack up a cooler of cheese and just drive until one of us said, 'Now that looks like a place that might want our cheese.'

Once we got it in people's mouths, the cheese sold itself."

With increasing numbers, specialty groceries, restaurants and individuals bought their cheese. Soon, sales went up 18% per year. That was enough encouragement to expand their offerings—bleu, asiago, cheddar among them.

Today the Mattinglys age 24 types of cheeses in their cooler, and their market has expanded to stores in seven states. They also market via the Internet (www.kennyscheese.com) and to tour buses, even though their farm is far off the beaten path.

In a new but modest metal building close to the milking barn, **Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese** operates in three areas: the cheese-making room, full of stainless steel tubs and other equipment to make the cheese curds and then press them into blocks of cheese; a small walk-in cooler for storing and aging their products; and the business office, where Beverly oversees marketing and shipping.



Kenny's father, Kenny Sr., works with Francisco Lopez in salting cheese curds.

The farm still milks about 130 cows, even though only a fifth of their production is used for the cheese. That's not a bad situation right now; milk prices are at or near an all-time high. But it was only a year ago when the Mattinglys were losing money on the milk and making their only money from the cheese.

The plan is to cut the herd to 80 cows, fed mostly on grass, and produce only cheese. There are several benefits, says Kenny: Cows are healthier on grass, the cheese tastes better, and customers feel good about cows having "happier" lives in a pasture versus a feedlot. That's a marketing advantage. Another part of the plan is to be organic within the next few years.

Holsteins are the breed of choice for most dairies for a good reason: They are very efficient at turning grain to milk.

Pastures are another story, and that's why Kenny is gradually crossbreeding his herd with breeds that are more efficient on grasses and produce milk with higher butterfat and solids. New Zealand Friesian, Norwegian Red, Swedish Red, Jersey Brown Swiss are the better breeds for great cheeses.

When you visit with Kenny, it quickly becomes apparent that he is an enthusiastic supporter of U.S. farmers, especially small farmers who refuse to buy into the "economy of scale" argument.

Perhaps his views of U.S. agriculture were largely shaped by the 1980s farm crisis, a time when Kenny had become discouraged by the direction of farming. Farms were getting too big, he believed—and they still are.

Kenny caught a glimpse of that direction nearly 20 years ago on one of his trips to Eastern Europe, where he saw dairies that milked 4,000 cows and had hog operations of 800 sows. "It was depressing. It was all set up like a factory—real gray.

"What made me queasy was realizing this is what American agriculture is coming to. Farming is so personable, so important in the community and our way of life. Once people have left the land and the family has quit farming it, it's almost impossible to get it back."

Today, Kenny sees a brighter future. "People are wanting to know where their food comes from." That, he says, creates opportunities. "I've never seen a time that's offered so many possibilities for the small farmer."