

County Is State's Top Producer of Burley Tobacco, Hay, Milk and Cattle

It may be known as “the Barrens,” but Barren County is full of fertile fields. In fact, it’s the No. 1 producer of milk, burley tobacco, hay and cattle in the state, according to the USDA’s January 2006 agriculture statistics report.

“Agriculture is a way of life in Barren County. It’s the No. 1 thing that drives our economy,” says Mark Hughes, a fourth-generation cattle farmer and owner of Hughes Cattle Co. in Glasgow. “Barren County has more cattle than any other county east of the Mississippi River.”

The county’s success in agriculture is largely due to its topography, or the lay of the land.

“It’s great land for cattle, because there are lots of forages here. The good soil produces good, nutritious grasses,” Hughes says. “Barren County’s infrastructure is also wonderful, and it’s easily accessible to larger cities.”

Hughes Cattle Co. is a family operation that’s been in existence for four generations. It was officially established in 1991 under Mark and Letitia Hughes’ leadership, and they breed Angus cattle using the latest technologies and equipment.

“The electronic ID system we use allows us to place electronic tags in a cow’s ear and use a barcode scanner to read it,” Hughes says. “We’re able to keep all the information on that animal stored electronically.”

The Barren County Cooperative Extension Service is a valuable resource for area farmers.

“We provide a lot of educational opportunities for them to learn the newest methods in agriculture,” says Gary Tilghman, county extension agent for agriculture and natural resources. “Local producers do a great job using innovative methods to produce their crops.”

Many Barren County producers are beginning to incorporate agritourism into their farming operations, which educates the public about agriculture and stimulates interest about their products. One example is Kenny’s Farmhouse Cheese, located on a 200-acre family dairy farm in Austin.

Owned by husband-and-wife team Kenny and Beverly Mattingly, Kenny’s Farmhouse Cheese makes 25 varieties of cheese, including white cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, Asiago, Swiss, Havarti, Gouda and Kentucky Bleu Cheese.



Kenny and Beverly Mattingly own Kenny’s Farmhouse Cheese in Austin.

“It all began back when my dad moved me to this dairy farm from Indianapolis when I was 19,” Mattingly says. “I really enjoyed the dairy farm life, but with the prices of milk I realized it would be hard to survive. So I started looking for ways to add value to milk.”

Mattingly found the answer with a trip to Europe in the early 1990s.

“We visited a farm in Holland where a husband and wife made cheese and sold it to the local community, and we were inspired,” Mattingly says. “There wasn’t such a distance between farmers and consumers like there is in the United States, and I liked that model of agriculture. I was also concerned about how our country is losing our family farms, so I started looking around to see who else was doing the kind of thing I wanted to do.”

Once back home, Mattingly found a cheese maker in northern Kentucky who wanted to sell her equipment. He seized the opportunity.

“She gave us her cheese recipe and helped us make our first batch,” Mattingly recalls.

Today, school groups and tourists visit the Mattingly farm to learn how cheese is made, from milking the cows at 4 a.m. to piping raw milk into stainless steel vats in the cheese laboratory and hand-cutting and packaging each block and round of cheese.

Hughes Cattle Co. also hosts several groups and university visits each year.

“We show the basics of the cattle operation – what happens after a cow gives birth to a calf and what it goes through before it’s on your table,” Hughes says.

Kenny’s Farmhouse Cheese sells its cheeses online and at area farmers’ markets as well as wholesale to wine shops and health food stores.

“I enjoy seeing our cows graze, turning that into milk and then turning the milk into cheese,” Mattingly says. “Then seeing people taste it and say, ‘Wow – that’s good.’ ”

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