

Crescent City dairy farm changes the industry

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Blake and Stephanie Alexandre grew up working on family dairy farms and always knew they would one day own and run their own dairy farm.

What they didn't know is they would revolutionize the way family dairy farms can operate.

Blake Alexandre grew up on his family's farm in Humboldt County while Stephanie was working with her parents in Southern California. When they met and got married, they worked together on the farm in Southern California while dreaming of stepping out on their own.

In 1992, they made the move, buying 560 acres near Crescent City. Over the years, they have slowly added on when land became available. Today, Alexandre Family Farm is 4,000 acres in Del Norte and Humboldt counties.

They have also been joined by four of their five children, with their youngest still in college.

They graze 4,500 cattle and up to 45,000 chickens on that land, running what was one of the earliest organic farms in the country.

"Everything we do is organic," Blake said. "We raise the chicken from day one up and the cows from day one up as organic."

As they stepped out on their own, the Alexandres became leaders in the environmental movement, not because of politics, but because it made sense on their farm.

Blake explained that taking care of the land and animals is just the right way to run their dairy farm.

When you run thousands of head of cattle and tens of thousands of chickens on the land, it is imperative that the land produce high-quality grass. So, Blake and Stephanie have become experts on grass, soil and what works best.

“We’re big-time grass farmers,” Blake said. “We lean on grass a lot for the cows and chickens. We’re very fortunate that we are in this region where we can lean on grass all year. We can graze 300 days a year.”

And the key to good grass is good soil. So, Blake has become an expert on soil. By treating the land right, it benefits his business and nature as a whole.

“We’re trying to move forward and make products that have solutions to the biggest problems in our country, the health of the people and the environment. The way we do that is soil. That gives health to our community, financial health and healthy people.”

The Alexandres began working on improving soil quality, largely through a massive program of turning cow manure into high-quality compost. The compost is then spread throughout the fields regularly to slowly improve the soil quality. The Alexandres have also taken steps to rebuild natural wetlands on their land.

And the result has been better than imagined.

“Because we built it, the bald eagles now come, the elk now come and the Aleutian geese come,” Blake said.

The Aleutian geese is a story that may have changed our world. Blake said when they began to make the improvements on the farm, there were just a few thousand geese left in the world. The geese fly through California twice a year when heading south for the winter and north for summer. With the removal of predators from the Aleutian Islands, the goose population began to grow. When changes on the Alexandre farm and two others in Central California began to take hold, the geese used those farms as a resting spots.

What was once hundreds of birds resting is now tens of thousands every year as the population is improving. Alexandre said 85 percent of the entire population used their farms in Del Norte County 15 years ago during critical recovery time.

Improving the land and cattle genetics has also improved the milk the dairy produces. While the average cow produces milk with between 3 and 3.5 percent butter fat, the cattle at Alexandre Dairy are routinely between 4 and 4.5 percent butter fat. Alexandre Family Farm’s No. 1 selling milk, its version of whole milk, has 6 percent butter fat.

Stephanie explained that while fat in milk has long been considered a negative, studies have shown the natural fats are great for bodies.

“You’re getting more of the good stuff this way,” Blake said. “Fat is not the enemy, sugar is.”

The Alexandres also process their milk differently than most. Using the old-fashioned technique of heating the milk slowly to at least 145 degrees for 30 minutes is a time-consuming process, but it makes a milk with a 25-day shelf life.

As their product has become more available, mostly along the entire west coast, they have begun hearing from fans. Every day, they receive messages and letters saying thank you.

“We receive those things daily now,” Blake said. “That’s why we do it. We want to bring sustainability to our farm, but we want to do it for our community and our customers.”

Several years ago, the Alexandres learned about A2, a digestible protein found in mother’s milk and the milk of all mammals. The big exception was dairy. Most dairy cattle had a change in their DNA that created a protein that does not break apart naturally called A1. As a result, more and more people began getting symptoms assuming they were lactose intolerant.

Blake and Stephanie decided they wanted their cows to be different. So through and extensive and expensive process, every cow on the farm received a DNA test to see if they had the A2/A2 protein. Those that did were separated from those that did not. Every bull used for breeding was also tested with a goal of having a dairy farm where the A2 protein (digestible dairy) is back in the milk.

Since 2007, every cow on the farm and every cow born on the farm gets the test. The result has been a herd of A2 cows which enables to Alexandre Dairy to sell milk that is A2/A2, with both the mom cow and the bull A2 positive.

With A2 back in the milk, almost no one has issues drinking it.

“Folks that have had dairy intolerance for many, many years try it and say, ‘Oh, that works for me,’” Blake said.

The Alexandre Family Farm was the first dairy in the United States to have an A2 herd and is one of only a handful today.

The result is a product that consumers love. They sell their traditional milks, but also have chocolate, vanilla and ginger turmeric milks. Three kinds of yogurts, cream and other goodies are also available. During the holiday season, egg nog is also on the menu. But even the egg nog, chocolate and vanilla flavors have very limited sugar.

“Good food doesn’t have to be sweet to taste good,” Stephanie said. “It just has to be good.”

The company sells throughout Washington, Oregon and California through places like Whole Foods and other natural food stores. They also ship nationwide through Azure Standard.

The key to their success, today and into the future, is doing things right. Whether that’s treating the soil or getting A2 herds, the Alexandre Family Farm is taking that step.

The Alexandre Family Farm store is located at 7955 Bailey Road in Crescent City.