

Over The Moon cheese

By Kenrick Riley

SITTING on her mum's knee, three-year-old Georgia hesitates over the cow's names. "Lucy and Bella, Swish, um ... Swash ..." At this point, her grandparents drive up to the farmhouse after a long trip away, grey-nomading the Red Centre. With a squeal, Georgia escapes her recital with arm-flung glee, leaving her mother, Juliet, to name the five remaining cows behind the Over The Moon cheese company.

That's right. Over The Moon is a nine-cow enterprise.

About 150 litres of milk a day. But it all goes straight into gorgeous cheese, beautifully packaged on-farm, and sold in a number of small outlets from Perth to Albany.

Long ago, a dairy needed 50 cows for a living. Then it grew to 80. With deregulation, farmers suddenly needed a big herd, bigger equipment, and tons of fertiliser - all to produce bulk milk.

At least in the early days, farmers separated milk on-farm, sent cream to the factory and fed whey to the pigs - two lots of value-adding.

But Juliet Bateman and David Schober value-add to every litre on their tiny dairy in south-west Western Australia.

Juliet grew up on a farm outside nearby Kojonup and was a physiotherapist in rural Mount Barker when she met her partner.

David's grandad was a self-sufficiency nut in both Austria and Australia. But David gained a physical education teaching degree in Melbourne before heading to Mackay in North Queensland to coach basketball.

He later crossed the Nullabor to coach Albany's state league team while managing the local aquatic centre. In 2003, Juliet and David both

yearned for some space so bought a 12 hectare paddock near Redmond with a run-down house, 15 minutes from work in Albany.

Two years later, with new baby Georgia (younger brother Luke is now one), Juliet needed something to do from home. So they bought Molly the Jersey, milked her for two years and turned the excess into yoghurt and cheese - after reading how to do it in a book.



ABOVE: David Schober and Juliet Bateman with their small herd of nine cows at the Over The Moon dairy.

RIGHT: A feature of Over The Moon cheese is its striking packaging.

Livestock



Three of the nine cows in the Over The Moon dairy herd.

“It wasn’t easy. But the chooks ate the disasters. And when we started giving cheese away, people said how good it was and wanted to buy it,” Juliet said.

David’s MBA study prompted them to explore a niche-market, organic cheese business

Their accountant confirmed the figures stacked up financially.

So they bought three Brown Swiss cows, five Jerseys, and a cross-bred.

Juliet checked each animal’s records and selected them on optimum fat and protein levels – not just milk quantity.

Industry deregulation had forced many small dairy farms out of business, so Juliet and David picked up a six stand, right-angle dairy, literally ‘lying in a paddock’.

In November 2007, they splashed out on a small, stainless-steel factory right beside the bails, commissioned a mini-pasteuriser from a Sydney fabricator, and started making cheese three days a week.

The proximity of the factory – hence very fresh milk – is a secret to great cheese, according to Juliet.

Conventionally, milk is pumped to vats, then into trucks, sloshed around on a long journey, dumped into other vats at a factory, and pumped again for processing.

This constant movement breaks down the triglyceride structure of milk, reducing its cheese-making quality.

At Over The Moon, the milk moves once – from dairy to factory – a distance of three metres.

Once there, strict controls over time, temperature and acidity vary for different cheeses. For camembert, the milk is pasteurised then brought to 35degC, culture is added and – when acid levels drop – rennet and white mould spores are mixed in.

Once curds are cut, they are stirred into cheese moulds to knit. When removed, the camemberts are turned for to five times during the next eight hours, and then allowed to mature before packaging.

During summer, Over The Moon focuses on marinated, plain and sun-dried tomato feta cheese.

But Juliet and David also make triple-cream brie, ricotta and two types of yoghurt.

Next winter, they will add three more cows to branch out into cheddar and blue cheeses. While feta is a high moisture cheese – producing three kilograms from 10 litres of milk – the harder cheeses make only one kg from 10 litres. Hence, these will be moulded during the winter milk peak and left to mature for 12 months.

Over The Moon employs five, part-time staff to pack the cheeses into striking, black-and-white containers before being despatched to stores. Juliet and David also take product to a weekly farmers market in Albany and a monthly market in Perth – mainly to raise their profile, talk to people about cheese and visit retailers.

Like much of south-west WA, Over The Moon’s soil is sand over laterite. “We started with rubbish pasture left over from an acidic, flower-growing operation,” David said.

He and Juliet have since planted white clover, kikuyu and rye grass – all without irrigation. Bore water is reserved for supplementing the cheese factory. No superphosphate or chemicals are used. In future, they might grow barley and spelt fodder to further increase their herd capacity.

With a small herd, careful monitoring picks up problems quickly.

If a cow develops mastitis and requires conventional treatment, Juliet and David need to remove her from milking for 180 days (not the three days as in conventional dairies).


So they tightly manage the milking process to avoid mastitis. It’s a matter of hygiene. Don’t let wet manure and mud splash onto udders while the teat is still open after milking. Hence, manure in the side-yard is washed out immediately to an angled collection pit.

Excess water flows back to pasture via a moveable, gravity-fed pipe. The remaining solids composting in the pit are later removed with a bobcat and spread.

Looking ahead, Juliet and David envisage a more diversified paddock operation. Sheep and chooks could rotate in after the herd to spread manure.

Pigs might be added to eat Guildford Grass tubers underground. And then there’s the goat plan. Goats complement cattle by grazing pasture at a different height.

Plus, Juliet’s original, single-stand milker sits idle as a back-up to the dairy in case of break-down. It could be used to milk goats. “The market is now very educated about goat’s cheese and there is potential for a goat/cow cheese blend. I’ve already experimented with some bought-in goat’s milk,” Juliet said.

It looks like young Georgia and Luke will have a lot of new names to master in coming years. But science might one day prove that eating great cheese is very good for the memory. 

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