



KING BROTHERS DAIRY

A Century of Tradition

BY MARIA BUTEUX READE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIE PASSANO

Drive by Kings-Ransom Farm in Schuylerville and you'll see about a hundred Holstein calves basking in the sun and enjoying fresh breezes. By age two, these black-and-white bovines will be contributing members of the King Brothers dairy herd, and their rich milk will show up in glass bottles delivered to the doorsteps of 500 lucky customers in the Saratoga region.

Jan and Jeff King, 47 and 44, were born and raised at Kings-Ransom Farm. The brothers are the third generation to farm this 90-acre property in the Bacon Hill area, about 15 minutes east of Saratoga. Their 110-year family history of dairy farming earned them the New York State Century Farm Award in 2008.

Jan and Jeff's grandfather, Edgar senior, farmed the land with his

Jeff continued, "We considered bottling and delivering our milk locally for at least five years, visiting other milk plants and doing our research. Then in 2010, once we found someone willing to pasteurize and bottle our milk, we could start the delivery business again. We e-mailed all our friends and generated our first deliveries. That spring, a reporter from *Saratoga Today* heard what we were doing and asked to do a story on us. That became a front-page article, and within a month, we had jumped to 50 customers, a nice boost for our business."

The King brothers currently milk 800 cows, three times a day, for a total production of 8,000 gallons per day. That's a lot of milk! The bulk still goes to a dairy cooperative, but a growing percentage is now reserved for their customers.

"It's very important to have our kids be involved," Jan said. "And not only our kids, but some of our employees' children as well. We're committed to giving these kids the opportunity to experience this lifestyle of a working farm, just as we did growing up. That's a main reason why we are doing this."

brothers in the early 20th century and established the King Brothers Colebrook Dairy. He delivered milk direct to families and stores in Saratoga from the 1930s to 1960s. His son, Edgar junior, took over the farm after he graduated from Cornell in 1963.

Traditions run deep in the King family. Jan and Jeff followed in their dad's footsteps, graduating from Cornell in 1990 and 1993, respectively, then returning home to run the family farm. They had grown up hearing stories of their grandfather delivering milk and had always dreamed of getting the bottling and deliveries up and running again.

WHAT'S NEW IS OLD

Jan picked up the story from here: "In the early 2000s, we started to sell some of our Angus beef to friends and families in the area. They began to ask for milk as well, but regulations at the time prohibited selling raw milk direct from the farm. However, that got us to thinking. We live in an area that's receptive to locally grown and supportive of open space initiatives. We wondered how we could market our milk. We'd been growing our dairy herd numbers, so this seemed like a decent avenue for our product."

Jan reflected on changing times: "We have Holsteins while my granddad had Guernseys in the 1920s and '30s. Back then, milk really had no value, just the cream. They'd sell what milk they could on the delivery route but then skim the rest and sell the cream to someone who would make butter and sell it to the city. The pigs would get the skim milk and if there was any left over, it probably was dumped out in the field. They didn't have all the market options that we have today. It's just the way things were back then."

What hasn't changed is trust, and consumer confidence is paramount. King Brothers' milk is all natural, free of growth hormones and antibiotics and produced exclusively from cows on their family farm. "Our customers appreciate that we are open to the public," Jan said. "We have open-house days, and anyone can come visit the farm. There's a connection that develops between our customers and us. They trust us and can see how well we treat our cows and the care that goes into the making of our products. They know that the product going into the bottle is of the highest quality. That trust has helped us build our base."

The delivery business has exploded to about 500 customers, delivering four days a week on five routes, mainly along the I-87 corridor from Lake George to Half Moon, and Clifton Park north to

Queensbury. Over the years the Kings have added products to supplement the delivery staples of milk, beef, eggs and cheese. Chocolate milk is a signature item, of course, and customers rave about it, especially kids! Jan and Jeff keep their focus on locally grown or produced, and customers offer suggestions as well. About 200 items are available online and in the farm's retail space. In addition to local yogurts, customers can order specialty items such as Morgia's pastas from Watertown, Amigo's salsa made in Schuylerville, a wide range of meats from Oscar's smokehouse in Warrensburg, Gatherer's Granola produced in Schenectady and nut and seed butters from Albany's Peanut Principle and from the Saratoga Peanut Butter Company.

Interested customers can sign up at any time online by visiting KingBrothersDairy.com. People place their order online and customize it to fit busy schedules. Customers can order what they want and specify when they want it delivered. It's that simple. Most customers keep their own cooler on their porch or purchase an attractive metal insulated cooler box emblazoned with the King Brothers Dairy logo.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

The logo should probably proclaim "King Family Dairy" since it's a true family business. The brothers oversee different aspects of the farm. Jeff concentrates on the herd while Jan focuses on growing the feed stocks: hay, alfalfa, corn, soybeans. They take understandable pride that they grow 100% of their feed, on 2,500 acres spread across a 15-mile radius in Saratoga and Washington counties.

Jan's wife, Pandora, has her own veterinarian practice off-farm but serves as the farm's vet as well. Jeff's wife, Becky, serves as the financial officer for the farm and the dairy and oversees marketing and sales promotions. Another brother, David, is a dairy feed nutritionist in northern New York, and he visits the farm every three weeks to assess their blend and make feed recommendations. He takes samples of all the feed Jan grows on-farm and sends them to a lab for analysis of protein, nutrient, fiber and mineral content.

"We've got a closed loop here on the farm, with brothers and family all involved one way or another!" said Jeff with a smile. And the next generation is learning the ropes as well. The two brothers have five kids ranging from 16 to nine years old. The kids love the farm and show the registered Holsteins at fairs, 4H projects and various cow organizations. When schedules allow, they like to help with the calves.

"It's very important to have our kids be involved," Jan said. "And not only our kids, but some of our employees' children as well. We're committed to giving these kids the opportunity to experience this lifestyle of a working farm, just as we did growing up. That's a main reason why we are doing this. Certainly not because it's easy or making millions!" Jeff added, "Who knows if any of them will carry on the family business. Hopefully we've developed a business that allows each of them to stay involved in some aspect if they want."

MILK CAN'T GET ANY FRESHER

Jan and Jeff are in their sixth year of the revamped business, pleased with their current status but always with an eye to the future. In 2014, they formed a business plan to construct their own processing and

bottling facility on-farm. For the past five years, they had to send their milk off for processing at a small family farm about an hour and half away. However, the brothers dreamed of a fully integrated on-farm system with the cows milked in the barn and the milk processed and bottled just a few steps away.

That dream has become a reality in the form of a 10,000-square-foot dairy processing plant and retail space built in front of the barn. The milk from the bulk tank is pumped into the processing room where it passes through the cream separator and then into the mixing and blending storage tanks for different varieties of milk—chocolate, skim and whole. Last stops are pasteurizing and bottling. The brothers are committed to using classic bottles because glass keeps the product colder and helps milk taste fresher. Moreover, the reusable bottles are environmentally friendly and reduce landfill waste.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOLUTION

It's obvious that the brothers share the same vision and values. When asked about challenges, they paused. For a long time. A cow mooed in the background. The brothers scratched their heads and looked at one another. Jan spoke first. "Jeff and I work really well together, and we employ 20 people. With the team we have around us, it's not too often we look at something and say, 'Oh, my goodness, I don't think we can do that.' We have talented people who have been here a long time. We all have a strong can-do attitude and everyone pulls together to tackle any issues that may come up." Jeff added, "When there's a challenge, it gets taken care of. This on-farm bottling plant is a great opportunity for all of us. We would never consider it without the team we have onboard now. There's plenty to learn here even before we put milk in the bottles."

The one challenge they do face is finding new markets. Jeff acknowledged, "We can't just snap our fingers and make the marketing and distribution end work out. That takes time and energy and persistence. We've been doing it on a small scale. We need to change the scale of that operation."

The brothers hope to ramp up the bottled milk production and perhaps branch into new offerings. Jan explained, "We sell whole, skim, chocolate and cream. Ice cream and yogurt may come soon. But we want to master the equipment until we feel comfortable. Then we can establish new markets and expand into other products."

AND IN THEIR SPARE TIME...

The Kings remain fully invested in their community, serving on the local planning and zoning boards. "Our kids play a lot of sports so we coach youth baseball and football, and our wives have coached youth soccer. We have a lot of fun supporting our community. It's a nice balance to farming," said Jan.

Judging from the increasing customer base and steady activity at the retail store, it's clear that the community enjoys supporting the King family dairy in return. 🍌

KingBrothersDairy.com

