

Forging his own path

A New York dairyman wasn't raised on a farm, but that hasn't stopped him from finding success in the industry.

by Maggie Seiler

THERE are few country songs as iconic as "Mammas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys," and Ed Bruce's crooning lyrics from the 1970s still seem to accurately represent the common perception young people who are interested in dairying have about the industry. Most of them have heard it again and



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again from parents, friends and mentors who say it's not possible to dairy if you weren't born into it. The startup costs are too high, the margins aren't large enough and you'll never make any money.

A creative dairyman from New York has spent the seven years since his college graduation proving all those doubters wrong. His decision to enter the dairy industry was not made to keep up a family tradition, nor was he raised in a barn. After a high school job as an employee on his neighbor's dairy farm, Diesel Hitt was hooked. He said he has always really enjoyed the farm work and never found anything he would rather do.

Becoming a dairyman

The road to dairying took Diesel many places following high school. He attended school at SUNY Cobleskill and Cornell, then worked on several dairies scattered across the United States including Scipio Springs Dairy in Union Springs, N.Y. The farm owned by Jon Gilbert and Bill Morgan milks 800 cows and averages more than 30,000 pounds of milk per cow.

Jon and Bill were great mentors to Diesel, and in December 2009, they decided to help Diesel gain more ownership in the industry. A partnership between Diesel, Jon and Bill was

formed, and Windsong Dairy LLC was developed as a satellite operation of Scipio Springs Dairy with Diesel as the managing partner and Jon and Bill providing most of the capital.

The trio purchased an empty dairy that had been constructed in 1999 near Watertown, N.Y., with a double 16 herringbone milking parlor, freestall barns and 1,500 acres of cropland. After the sale was complete, Diesel quickly moved into action purchasing cattle and hiring employees. By April of 2010, the farm was milking 300 head of cattle, and four years later, they have reached capacity at 600 head averaging 29,000 pounds of milk per cow.

Getting off the ground

When Diesel first started, he focused completely on managing the cows and labor. As he has gotten more comfortable, his responsibilities have expanded to include making more financial decisions.

Diesel, like his mentors, focuses on efficiency on the farm. He culls fairly aggressively and tries to spend the farm's money near the milking parlor. He also replaced all the original mattresses in the freestall barns opting for sand bedding for cow comfort and



WINDSONG DAIRY LLC, established in 2010, is a satellite dairy of Scipio Springs Dairy. The farm's 600 cows are under the care of managing partner Diesel Hitt. Shown above are Diesel and wife Katy holding son Lane.

to help maintain their low somatic cell count.

The farm utilizes custom harvesters for all their cropland and sends the heifers to a custom grower, as well, to reduce costs and focus on the cows. Windsong also places a strong emphasis on their breeding program registering a 30 percent pregnancy rate among the cows. They have remodeled several buildings on the farm including their prefresh barn to better serve their goals. Just like Scipio Springs, Windsong focuses on empowering its employees to take a personal interest in the farm.

Know the industry

Diesel said there is still a lot he wants to learn about the industry, but he is taking it in one experience at a time. His wife Katy was raised on a farm, and he said her family is always willing to offer advice in addition to Jon and Bill's. Diesel and Katy also exhibit registered Holsteins at shows in New York where Diesel said he enjoys watching their genetics develop and be competitive.

For a young man who was not raised on a dairy, Diesel has accomplished a lot in a short amount of time and has made a name for himself in the industry. He was selected as the 2012 Graduate Producer by the National Dairy Shrine and was asked to speak as a member of the young dairyman panel at the 2014 National Holstein Convention.

All this has been possible because of his holistic industry perspective. A quick conversation with Diesel reveals his innate understanding of the industry from ways to make his operation run more smoothly to issues that he sees as opportunities for the future.

Diesel believes genomics will be a huge tool that will continue to be important for the breed's advancement. He is also paying special attention to the volatility of the milk markets and sees labor instability as a major challenge for the future of the industry.

Even with the concerns that Diesel has, he said he sees great opportunity for young people in dairying.

"Few other industries have this much potential as far as the numbers go," Diesel said. "I think there is a really bright future ahead of us."

Among all the uncertainties, one thing is for sure. Diesel has broke the dairy industry mold and is paving a path for future generations to follow. With the increasing age of the average farmer and fewer young people returning to their home farms, there will be more and more opportunities for bright young people like Diesel to partner with established dairy producers and make a home for themselves in the industry. 🐄

