

Value-added Agricultural Success Story

Sweetwater Valley Farm

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture



John Harrison was an "early adapter" to the concept of value-added agriculture in Tennessee.

John Harrison is a fourth-generation dairy farmer in rural Loudon County, Tennessee. His great-great grandfather, William, purchased the family farm in Philadelphia in 1901.

John, brother Steve and two other siblings grew up on the original farm, which Steve now runs. Their father, Charles, still works with Steve, and the family has managed to succeed in an industry that's experienced major downsizing in the number of small operations.

In 1987, newlyweds John and wife Celia purchased an interest in their farm, which now includes 1,200 acres. Celia was in her final year of medical school, and the next year began her medical residency at UT. The couple anticipated a lifelong commitment to the farm, which 10 years ago branched out into uncharted territory.

"I felt we had to take the farm in a different direction," says John. "The idea of a cheese plant was a logical choice. I wanted a value-added enterprise that was related but different."

Before taking the leap, John did extensive research, looking at every angle of the new venture. "One of the first things I did was contact Tommy Burch at UT," John recalls. "Tommy managed the creamery for years and had hands-on experience making good cheese."

He also consulted with experts at UT's Center for Profitable Agriculture, which had just been established. The Center was initially helpful with recommendations regarding computer software, bookkeeping and an Internet presence.

Today, Sweetwater Valley Farm operates one of only a handful of cheese factories in Tennessee. "I never dreamed it would be this successful," John observes. The store itself is situated on a small knoll above Highway 11, and visitors are treated to vistas of rolling farmland as far as the eye can see. The land is also used for growing corn, silage and hay.



Visitors can tour Sweetwater Valley Farm every day except Sunday to see the process from cow to cheese.



Sweetwater Valley Farm offers gift boxes, like the one above, filled with their cheese and other Tennessee products.



Customers can buy cheese in the fully stocked gift shop or online.

The Harrisons offer a fully stocked cheese shop at the farm, featuring 15 flavors of farmstead cheese as well as gifts and snacks. Through large picture-glass windows, visitors can watch the cheese being made in the state-of-the-art facility, which produces between 250,000 to 300,000 pounds of cheese annually.

The farm and retail store are open year-round for tours. "We emphasize the educational aspects of what we do," John says. "We show our guests the sequence of the food production chain and the process required in going from cows to cheese."

Marketing the cheese has had its challenges. "Although consumers prefer to buy locally produced food, it's difficult for small producers to place their products in regional or national chain stores," John says. "We've had some success with it, but most of our sales come from our store and Web site."

John is supportive of agritourism in Tennessee, although he wants to keep his business "real." "Agritourism is a good thing as long as it's done in a forthright way and not misleading," he observes. "Celia and I are taking it slow to make sure things are profitable before we try anything new."

Celia has reduced her hours as a family medicine practitioner to spend more time helping in the business. "Although I handle personnel, payroll and public relations, the family is always my priority," she says. The couple has five children ages 7 to 16.

"I really enjoy the production aspect of farming," says John, whose Holstein herd consists of around 900 milking cows and 900 young stock. "I guess I've been ahead of the curve on some things, but a lot of it has to do with timing. I feel like I was very fortunate to do something at a time when agritourism was first creating a lot of buzz."

As for local competition, there really is not any other business that offers the same local products or the same farm experience. "I don't worry about competition," John admits.

"In fact, I think it would be good if there were more cheese-makers around; then we could form a cheese guild and maybe even get national recognition!"

"Or an agritrail of local farms would be nice," he offers.

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The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

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