



Conversations with Fresh Milk Dairy Farmers

An Educational Program of the Farm to Consumer Foundation

Dairy Farmer Interview #1

Kris Unger

The Farm to Consumer Foundation is dedicated to encouraging the right of consumers to choose fresh nutritious foods and promote farming practices that focus on supplying these consumers with the products they prefer. There has been a very large increase in the number of families that want their milk, fresh, unpasteurized and unhomogenized (unprocessed). We are impressed with the variety of farming practices that have emerged to supply this product to those families. The Foundation is aware that there is no single model for fresh unprocessed milk production.

This interview is the first in what we hope will be a series of opportunities to talk with dairy producers across the USA that have been producing fresh unprocessed milk to their neighbors. Through these interviews we hope to highlight the diversity of operations and business models, the practical aspects of fresh milk production, and the enthusiasm these farmers have in their daily work. There are also other business models, many different versions of State oversight, differing consumer preferences, and very different geographies.

We begin this series with Kris Unger, who for many years has operate a cow share, fresh milk dairy, called Dairy Delight. Future interviews will be posted to show the rich diversity that has evolved in the practices of producing fresh unprocessed milk.

FTCF: It is good to talk with you Kris. Let's start.

Where is your dairy located?

KRIS UNGER: I am in Howell, Michigan, west of Detroit; east of Lansing; north of Ann Arbor; and south of Flint.

FTCF: How many milking cows do you have?

KRIS UNGER: Currently, there are 23 whose milk is going in the milk tank. Another seven are dry at the moment. Total herd on the farm, including calves, heifers, and dry cows, is 47.

FTCF: Are they on pasture?

KRIS UNGER: They are on pasture from the time grass is up in the spring until I don't have any that is easily grazed. The only ones that are ever in the barn are the young milk calves that are still being bottle fed. They go outside to pasture as soon as they learn to get their milk from a barrel feeder.

FTCF: How much pasture land do you have that the herd can use?

KRIS UNGER: About 90 acres total.

FTCF: Do you have a pattern for how you move cows around to the various pastures?

KRIS UNGER: Not really, they move to whichever pasture is ready. There's usually a couple of pastures that they get to first and a couple that I try to harvest at least a first and sometimes a second cutting [of hay], because the cows can't keep up with the Spring growth. So those fields typically come off as hay and end up in the pasture rotation later.

FTCF: And the whole herd goes together?

KRIS UNGER: No, we have three groups right now: First, the milk cows; they get first choice of everything. The second group is the dry cows and heifers, which either come behind the milk cows, or they've got their own section that I leave them in. The third group is the elementary kids, the young ones, the young stocks. There are essentially three pastures that I try to rotate them through.

FTCF: What do you do to manage your pasture other than shifting the cows around them?

KRIS UNGER: I don't do as good a job as I would like. For instance, the field they're in right now, it's the first time they've gone through it this year. Everything's grown so fast, it's now two - three-foot tall, but the grass is starting to seed out, so they don't want it and they're trampling it a lot. I should probably mow it for hay and feed it to them that way. As far as maintaining pastures, I do a lot of brush hogging, probably not as much as I should, because the older the grass gets, the less the cows like it. So, I knock down what they're not eating, and the cows can go through and eat up the fresh stuff.



FTCF: What about supplemental feed?

KRIS UNGER: I do not pack my cows full of any concentrate. Anything that they eat in the summer is pasture; in the winter it's hay or bailing. When they come into the milk barn, they get some dried molasses. And that's it. They do have free-choice minerals and free-choice salt in the fields. I also have free-choice kelp available for them. I've been using Agri-Dynamics for the minerals. This supplier has five different blends. In my opinion, cows have the ability to say, "This is what I need." And it's been interesting which of those five mineral blends or the amount of kelp that they eat, depending on which pasture they're in. It varies. A cow knows—just leave her alone and let her be a cow. Quit trying to make her into something she's not.

FTCF: In Michigan, you obviously have winters, and it gets cold and sometimes there is snow and other bad weather. What do you do for feed in the winter?

KRIS UNGER: In the winter my dry cows, heifers, and young stock get the hay I put up. It's good for them; but it's not milk-making hay. So, I end up buying most of the hay for the milking cows in the dead of winter. I have a friend that does a great job of finding bailing for me. Bailing does wonders compared to dry hay, so I do end up spending extra money on winter feed for the milk cows. They are fed outside with round bailing feeders. Every time I feed, I move the feeders, so the cows are not standing in the same place. That way they move the manure throughout the pasture. I do have two lots that are pretty much winter lots. I have made windbreaks out of stacks of old hay bales or straw, so they've got a windbreak on the north and the west sides. This also serves as bedding; it works well for them. Most of the time, they don't use the shelters, but if it's really windy then they'll use the windbreaks. If it snows a lot, they do just fine. In 21 years, I've only had two frozen teats; we used DMSO on them and didn't lose either teat.

FTCF: How do the cows get water?

KRIS UNGER: I have a water trough near the milk barn, because I usually keep the milk cows pretty close to the barn in the winter. The water supply has an all-season, automatic waterer. Quite often, on cold mornings, I have to go out and pour a bucket of hot water on it to thaw the surface ice, so the cows can get to it. Then they're fine the rest of the day. In the second winter pasture, I have a big water trough and a hydrant out in the field, and I run a hose to it. You have to turn on the hose every time it needs filling. It's about a three-hundred-gallon tank. I used to run an electrical extension cord and heater out there to keep that open, but I quit doing that. Now, I just keep a hammer and pitchfork handy, and if there's ice on the top, I break it, pitch out the ice, fill it back up, and they're fine all through the day.

F'TCF: How do the cows get water in the summertime?

KRIS UNGER: For summertime I've got a black poly pipe that runs above the ground through the entire farm with movable inserts that you plug in, so you can have an instant water supply. That has been wonderful. I do have to drain that system before winter and each spring when you hook the water back up. I do end up driving around, checking for splits in the poly pipe. Any splits are easy to fix—you just cut out the damaged section, replace it with an insert and a few hose clamps, and you're up and going. So, that's been great. I used to do water in a thousand-gallon tank, on a wagon. It was really scary when going down a hill. That's a lot of water behind you! But the poly pipe is absolutely wonderful. You can plug into the pipe anywhere you want, stick in as many plugs as you want, and move your water supply each time you move the cows across the pasture.

F'TCF: Do you have a well with a pump?

KRIS UNGER: It's actually just the well that we use for the house, so it's only a half-horse-power motor. I am amazed how well that pump has done. We probably have at least two miles of pipeline running through the farm, and that single well and pump seems to do it all just fine.

F'TCF: One of the other things about your property is that it is fairly hilly, and there are a lot of wood lots.

KRIS UNGER: Woods, swamp, and hills. The only problem I have with hills is cows lying down on them the wrong way, with their body downhill and their feet uphill. Sometimes they can't get up. Probably 90% of the deaths we have had here have been the result of cows lying down wrong. If they can't get up and I don't find them until the next morning milking time, they bloat and end up dying. If I find them in time, I can just put a halter on them and give a little tug on the head. Once in a while I have to go out with the tractor and give them a boost, just to get them on their feet, and then they're fine.

F'TCF: Let's talk about milking. How often do you milk?

KRIS UNGER: Twice a day, seven days a week. Usually, I milk around 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. I'm a night person, not a four a.m. person. With this schedule, you can get your kids off to school in the morning before milking and doing chores. I liked having time when the kids would come home to have dinner, do homework, and other family things. And then, when they're off to bed, you go out and milk again. So, you really can set milking around your own schedule.

F'TCF: Do you use electric fences?

KRIS UNGER: Yes, definitely. We use a high-tensile wire perimeter and try to keep three strands on the perimeter. We say, "Good fences make good neighbors." I also use

electric fencing for splitting up pastures. I think my largest pasture is probably ten acres, but that's split into two fives, down the middle, with a high-tensile wire. What I learned over time was to use a portable, poly electric wire in the five-acre pastures to make a lane next to the wire that splits the field, all the way to the back end, and then across the back. This makes it that the cows have that back section to feed on first. Then, when I go out for the next milking and push the cows down the lane—make sure you lock them out so that they don't come back!—I just have to pick up that back wire, and move it up enough for another twelve hours of feeding. It makes it real easy and fast: I can give them twelve hours of feeding with ten minutes' work with the wires. When they return to that field after milking, they just march back across the field; spreading their manure and eat as they



go.

FTCF: How do you get the cows from the pasture to where they're going to be milked?

KRIS UNGER: They are pretty good about responding to my whistle. That will get them coming. Sometimes they are waiting for me. But other times I need to go out to the pasture for them. I either walk or drive out and get them moving down the lane. We lock the gates behind them in the lane to keep them going the right way. And while I am out there, I can move the hot wires for the pasture rotation.

FTCF: Describe your milking parlor.

KRIS UNGER: I have what's called a flat parlor. When we started dairying, neither my husband nor I had ever milked a cow before. My husband had the idea of doing a seasonal dairy.

We built the barn with the intention that, if in five years we realized we didn't want to continue dairy farming, we would have some other use for this building. We built a 25-by-50-foot concrete block barn. It's split into three sections: one is half of the barn; the other half of the barn is split in two. We used garage doors so we could use it for a garage in the future. The milking parlor takes up half of the building/barn, and the cows come in through a big double door. We have four stanchions on each side.

I have a closed pipeline system for the milk. When we started there were a lot of dairies going out of business, and we were able to pick up a lot of good used equipment. I think the only thing we bought new were the stanchions. I have two milkers on each side. The pipeline does its own self-cleaning. After milking I always rinse the pipeline first with five gallons of water, just to get the extra milk out and down the drain. After milking I bring the milkers into the milk room, put them in the stainless-steel sink, and the pipeline system does its whole automatic wash and acid bath. And then, before the next milking, I run a sanitizer through the whole system.

FTCF: Let's get back into the history. You started out working seasonally, shipping milk to a commercial dairy processor.

KRIS UNGER: Right. In the beginning we were shipping milk, not doing any business with consumers.

FTCF: How many cows did you have when you were shipping?

KRIS UNGER: Tops was about 45. And then they were seasonal. That means that they were all milking at the same time, which was nice because, as the farmer, you got January, February, and part of March off. And you had all your babies at once.

FTCF: How did you get started with fresh, unprocessed milk?

KRIS UNGER: I had gone to one of the grazing conferences, and I met a dairy gal that was looking into cowshares. About that same time, the Michigan State Department of Agriculture had stopped a dairy farmer who was transporting fresh unprocessed milk to distribution sites for consumers. That ticked me off. Here's a guy trying to make a living. People have a right to drink what they want to drink; and our state police had a sting operation, wasting our taxpayer dollars over milk. And it ticked me off to the point that that was my tipping point. And I thought, "You thought you just got rid of one farmer, well you just created a new one."

We were seasonal at the time, so in January I would usually get rid of all the cows that weren't born in our seasonal window. When I decided to do cowshares, I kept those girls for a separate, fresh milk operation.

FTCF: How long did you overlap?

KRIS UNGER: Pretty much zero, because Michigan Milk Producers (where I was shipping my milk) found out what I was doing and told me they would no longer accept any of my milk. I believe our state milk inspector told them. I was up-front with the milk inspector and told him what I was wanting to do. And his attitude was, “You can’t do that. You know, you can’t be doing raw milk; you can’t be drinking that.” And I responded to him, “Well, yeah you can.” And so I told him everything I knew at that time, and his comment was, “Wow, you should be a spokesperson for raw milk.” I think he probably got word to Michigan Milk Producers. Their rep came out and said, “Well, you’re in violation of your contract, and you’re done.” Which in a way was fine, because it pushed me further into cowshares. Had they let me just be a small supplier of fresh milk to consumers on the side, I never would have been aggressive about it. But, when you take away the rest of my income, well, then I’m going to go find customers.

So, for me it worked out that we sold the extra (seasonal) cows to help with immediate financial support, and my husband was working full-time off the farm, so we did still have an income. And that’s what started us.

FTCF: How did you decide to do cowshares as opposed to any other way of doing raw milk?

KRIS UNGER: Well, in Michigan, selling milk that is not pasteurized was illegal; still is.

However, the law states that if you own cows, it’s your own milk. So, we chose to be legal. That’s what got us into cowshares. Chuck Oliver had a cowshare operation over in Lapeer, Michigan. He was the farmer that spearheaded cowshares in the state of Michigan. When he started, the government wanted to close his dairy down. He took them to court. He fought hard for the right to run his way of business. I went over one day and visited with him. He gave me a copy of his cowshare contract. He called it “Cow Boarding.”

At that time, another dairy family in the area was also doing cowshares, and their lawyer had prepared a contract for them to use. So it was already happening in the state. We decided to run our dairy that same way.

FTCF: What kind of problems did you have making the transition from shipping to cowshares?

KRIS UNGER: Probably the biggest one was finding a smaller bulk tank, and—it was January or February—remodeling the milk room [for consumers] at that time of year, with doors wide open and freezing temperatures, was difficult.

FTCF: How did the first families learn about Dairy Delight?

KRIS UNGER: I made up a few little printed notices and hung them in a few of the local health food places. Nearby, in Argentine, the Westwind Mill grind their own organic grain and sell it in a small retail operation. I hung one of the notices there. I think that's where the first customer came from. Since then, it has all been word-of-mouth or the RealMilk.com website. I now have a website, and I do get quite a few phone calls with people saying, "I saw your website." But the vast majority is through word-of-mouth. I've never run ads, never paid for advertising. I haven't had to. Again, if this was my only income, then I probably would have done things differently.

In the beginning we didn't have a lot of customers. And I have to tell you, my very first customer (she's still with me) was so excited. I can still remember her. And after she agreed to get our milk, my dad and I looked at each other, thinking, "Oooh boy! What did we just get ourselves into?"

FTCF: So, at the beginning, how many cows were there?

KRIS UNGER: After the first year, I had enough shareholders to support probably four or five cows.

FTCF: And how many do you have now—how many shares do you have and how many families?

KRIS UNGER: Family-wise, we float between about 260 and 280. The number of shares tends to increase over time, because when a family leaves, they usually sell their shares or pass them on for free as a blessing to the next person, and people also buy new shares.

FTCF: Now that you are providing your shareholders with the milk, how does your milking system work?

KRIS UNGER: When I started cow shares, I needed a smaller bulk tank. Finding the little tanks was hard at that time; a lot of people had bought them up. But I was able to find one for about \$200. I really lucked out. We put this smaller tank up on stilts, so that people getting their milk don't have to be down on the floor trying to fill their bottles. That has worked great. Milk goes straight from the cows into the bulk tank through a sock filter. The bulk tank chills it. I have it set at 33 degrees F. It has its own beater bar, on a timer, to keep the cream stirred in. There's a nice, easy spout for people to get their milk. I put a little stool there so they can set their bottles on it. It works great.

It's cowshare owners' responsibility to bring clean bottles to fill with their milk. In the beginning, there were a few people that I just took their bottles when I saw them and cleaned them for them. I could see that they were really dirty. But in the last four or five years, I'd say there's not been a problem with dirty bottles at all.

FTCF: Are there materials, other than the contract, that you routinely give to shareholders?

KRIS UNGER: I give everybody one of the booklets, *Caring for Fresh Milk* by Peggy Beals. I tell them there's probably more information in here than you'll ever want, but it's good information. I keep a supply of that booklet in the barn.

F'TCF: Let's talk about the way the families actually get their milk. Do they come to the farm?

KRIS UNGER: They come to the farm. I don't offer any deliveries. I don't have time for it. I also like to know my customers. So, they have a day of the week that's their day to come pick up their milk, any time from eight in the morning until eight in the evening. They fill their own bottles from the bulk tank, not a very hard process at all. I spread them out through the week; seven days a week. If someone wants to switch their day to pick up, they just need to double check with me that I don't have a whole bunch of other people on the same day.



On their pick-up day, cowshare owners bring their bottles to fill from the bulk tank. There's a sign posted on the tank with instructions. It says, "wash your hands; rinse the spout; get your milk; take the spout off; rinse it again; sign the sign-in sheet so I know you were here; if you're paying your boarding fee, write it down there." I have a bottle of hydrogen peroxide water right beside the bulk tank, so that if people do want to spray everything down with it, they can. I just ask them to rinse the hydrogen peroxide off before dispensing their milk, because any left on surfaces may kill the good bacteria too. Some people bring their own soap, their own scrubbing brushes, their own whatever, and that's just fine. The minimum requirements are: Wash your hands; rinse the spout; clean up after yourself.

F'TCF: Do cowshare owners receive a set amount of milk?

KRIS UNGER: I produce by the share, and a share is a gallon of milk a week. People can purchase as many shares as they want. I just say to them, "The more cow you own, the more milk you will have."

F'TCF: What kind of range do you have as to how much milk a family gets each a week?

KRIS UNGER: We do offer half shares, so a half a gallon a week is the smallest amount, and my top person is getting eight gallons a week. My average is probably 2.4 gallons a week per family.

Most people pick up their milk weekly, but I do have a few biweekly people (once every two weeks). They get twice their amount of milk each time they come. That's a little

rougher on me, because now I need to have more milk on those weeks. I try to rotate these shareholders, or make sure they're opposite other biweekly people, so one week somebody's getting their two weeks of milk, and the next week somebody else is getting theirs. I do not have any that are monthly.

FTCF: The scheduling for all this sounds reasonably complex.

KRIS UNGER: Yeah, it can be, but we can usually work it out. I try to remind people, "I'm not Kroger. We don't have an endless supply of milk. There's only so much the cows provide." I once had somebody say, "I won't be able to pick up my milk because I'm supposed to go 90 days without milk." She didn't want to pay her boarding for that time. My reply was, "No, I'm still taking care of your cows." "Well, maybe," I think she said, "maybe just take the milker off sooner." Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. I can't go to the parlor and say, "Okay, girls! Make one less gallon this week."

FTCF: We know that cows don't produce exactly the same amount of milk all year round, so how do you manage when you've got more milk, and how do you manage when you've got less?

KRIS UNGER: I kept my old, large bulk tank from when I was shipping milk. When I clean the smaller tank, I can put any extra milk in there, and then I have it for calves, or chickens, or pigs, or turkeys. I have a friend right now that does grass-fed or pastured pork, and he can take extra milk for his pigs. In winter, of course, the milk volume is going to drop, because the gals are out there trying to keep themselves warm. One option I have to maintain supply for share owners is to milk three times a day. I also try to make sure that I've got more cows milking in the winter than in the summer. Once they get into fresh pasture, then they'll just go wild on how much they make. What the cows are eating definitely makes a difference in the amount of milk. Other than the effect of seasons, if I'm not getting much production, it's usually for one of two reasons: either I've got a lot of late-lactation cows, or my feed just isn't what they need. If it's the second, then we hunt around for better bialage. Bialage works so wonderfully. The volume will go up. But, as I said, if necessary, I will milk three times a day.

For a lot of this supply management, I fly by the seat of my pants. Like, right now, we've just got oodles of milk because the cows have hit fresh pasture. I've had a lot freshen in the last two months, so they're at peak production. This year, I decided to get rid of the remaining A1/A2 cows on the farm because we've got more than enough milk.

FTCF: How do you keep track of the milk supply produced and picked up by share owners?

KRIS UNGER: I do some of the tracking on the computer, although I usually end up printing it off on a piece of paper, because I like to have a piece of paper in my hand. I just print a

page for each day of the week, with the names of all the people that are supposed to come that day and how many gallons they get. I have a sign-in sheet in the barn where share owners write in their name and how many gallons they're picking up today, as well as noting if they're buying bottles or caps. At the end of the day, I take those sheets in the house and go through my day sheet of who's supposed to be there, and just circle that they were here. If they paid their boarding, I write down the date that they paid it. So, all of my payments from shareholders are on that one sheet. I can look at the whole year and see that everybody's made all their boarding payments or if they're getting behind.

F'TCF: Do you have a conversation with the shareholders when they first start?

KRIS UNGER: Yes. When they first come, I set a date and a time to meet with them. They're here probably at least an hour. I go over the contract with them, to make sure they understand every bit of it. If I have any questions, I ask them. And there are basic things that I tell them, like: the milk is for their personal use only. And I always ask them; if *ever* you get an intestinal infection, whether you think it's the milk or not, call me. I tell them this for two reasons. One, I can send a milk sample from the bulk tank to the lab right away to make sure we *don't* have a problem here. Two, I can immediately touch base with everybody else that picks up on that same day and see if anyone else is having any problems. If we see others are sick or the testing indicates a problem, then we can start immediately getting focused on finding and correcting the problem. If word of their illness gets to the health department and they contact the person, they will probably ask: "Do you drink raw milk?" I do not ever expect shareholders to lie to the authorities. I don't ask them to do that in any way, shape, or form.

F'TCF: On an on-going basis, how do you communicate with shareholders?

KRIS UNGER: Oh, I do spend a lot of time with them, when they come with the contract. We spend at least an hour, chit-chatting and getting to know each other, and I show them the barn, what we do. We walk through the whole process and talk about any questions. After that, I like seeing my people. One reason I like not delivering is that I feel people should have a connection with their farm and their animals. They *own* those animals. They ought to know how they're being raised and be able to see them if they want. I also like knowing my people. I learn from them, and I'm able to pass stuff on. It's amazing how many times they tell me something health-wise, or something's going on, and I'll be darned, three days later, somebody else needs that information. And I just feel God's got His hand in here. Doing cowshares does take a lot of time, at least the way I do it. I know a lot of people just run it as a business. I like to know my people. I enjoy my time with them, and I think they do with me.

F'TCF: Do you ever turn away somebody that wants to get your milk?

KRIS UNGER: Not really. Most people who come here already know about the benefits of fresh, whole milk.

F'TCF: How do you handle losing and gaining shares?

KRIS UNGER: In the contract, it states that when you don't want to obtain fresh unprocessed milk anymore, you need to sell your ownership of your animal. And I try to remind people, "It's like owning a horse, and you're boarding it. When you don't want to ride it anymore, you don't just leave it there. You pay the boarding until you've sold it, and it's the same thing with the cows you own. One way is they just put a note up in the milk room. They just put their name on it, their phone number, how many shares they have for sale, and what price they want for them. They post that up on the board, so that if somebody wants a new share or wants to expand, we look there first. When I have new people coming in, if there's some of these hanging up there, and the departing family have given me the price they want for it, I can sell it to the new folks. And then I just let that family know, "Your share's been sold; your money's here." When people are willing to put their shares up for free, or they're passing them on as a blessing, those shares disappear very quickly. My contract does state that if they haven't paid their boarding for 90 days, then they lose their ownership. They're not going to get their ownership money back, and their contract is terminated.

F'TCF: Typically, how do owners pay their boarding fee?

KRIS UNGER: It's check or cash. I'd say two thirds pay in the milk room, and we do everything on the honor system. I trust that they're taking the right amount of milk; they gotta trust that I'm doing the cows the way I say I am. They make their own change if they're paying cash. There is a lock box to put the bigger bills and checks in. Others have their bank just send me the check in the mail, like a monthly bill that the check just arrives, which is kind of fun. Some people pay monthly. Some will pay three months, six months, or the whole year in advance, which is nice. If they pay in January or February, it is nice to have that extra because that's when I'm having to buy hay.

F'TCF: Let's go back to the herd. How many do you have currently?

KRIS UNGER: Right now, we're milking 23, and there's got to be at least six that are dry. I started out with Jerseys. Then we got some Milking Shorthorns from a friend. And then we ended up using his bull for a little while, so we had Milking Shorthorn/Jersey crosses.

Then somebody gave us a Dutch Belt, so we got that into the herd. I've stuck pretty much with the Jersey bulls for years.



When we decided to go with the A2/A2 milk, the only bull I could find was a Guernsey bull, so we ended up with him. So now we have Jersey/Guernsey crosses, Jersey/Shorthorn crosses, Shorthorn/Guernsey crosses, and Dutch Belt, so we have a bunch of mutts. I do have a few purebreds, but the herd is mostly crossbreeds.

F'TCF: Do you try to keep a closed herd?

KRIS UNGER: Yes. I find buying somebody else's animal usually doesn't work. One time I bought; I think it was two cows from some place that was a confinement farm. Those two cows had no clue what a pasture was. I'd send them out to pasture where there's beautiful grass, and they'd just find their way back to the barn. I finally had to lock them in the pasture, and for three days they just stood there and cried, bellowed, and everything, until they finally figured out: "Look down between your feet." And then they did okay.

When I've bought cows from confinement farms, I also find the body form is quite different if you looked from their back end, it's just a straight—there's no barrel to them. With my girls, I always want to make the joke that they are saying, "Does MY butt make my stomach look big?" I have read that animals do best if they live within fifty miles of where they were born. So, if I'm buying something from quite a distance, I reason that it's not going to work as well.

I just like my girls. I know what they're doing, and I know their background. I've handled them. They know what hot wires are. They know how to move between

pastures. Somebody else's, that's never been out in pasture, they don't know what they're doing. Cows from confinement operations can't handle the heat; they can't handle the winter.

F'TCF: You think a lot about the breed of the cows and how you're doing it. You're spending a lot more time, certainly than a conventional dairy farmer would. What's your goal? What are you aiming for, and how do you get there?

KRIS UNGER: I don't care what she looks like as long as she's got some good feet, so she can walk through the pastures and she stays healthy. Our biggest health problems are some milk fevers and some hoof-rot—which I've learned to take care of, so I don't call the vet for that. I don't call them for milk fever anymore either. Once in a while, I have had some help pulling a calf, but other than that, I just leave them alone. They're outside, eating the way they're supposed to, in the sunshine, and eating good pasture—just leave them alone. Let the cow do what she's supposed to be doing

F'TCF: What are the age ranges in the herd?

KRIS UNGER: I usually don't have many freshen at two years old. I go more by size, rather than age before I'd put them with the bull. I don't supplement those girls with anything. In the winter they're getting hay, their free-choice minerals; summer they're on grass. I'm assuming some farmers push their cows a lot harder with other food, to get them to grow faster. I don't, so a lot of mine are a year and a half old, maybe two, even, before the bull gets to them. So, cows in the milk barn are probably anywhere from two and a half to—I think my two oldest are fourteen. Probably half of them are six years old and under, and the rest are six and over.

F'TCF: You seem happy with the size of the herd right now, so the overall management of the operation is about right?

KRIS UNGER: Now that we've achieved 100% A2/A2, we're about right.

F'TCF: What is your current feeling about Dairy Delight?

KRIS UNGER: I love it! If I had to ship milk, I wouldn't do it. I'm not going to spend time making this great milk and then have it destroyed with pasteurizing. The people are great; the hours are wonderful. I don't know many dairy people that get hugs and kisses every week and appreciation and "Thank you for what you're doing." People are great. And the cows are wonderful. I can't think of a better animal to work with. They're a delight. They eat a bunch of grass and turn it into fantastic milk. They're easygoing, and again there's enough dairy animals that if there's one that doesn't work out, then, "Adios. You're out of here." I do have a talk with a few: "You're acting like a beef animal, and we eat beef. Keep behaving like that and you're eaten." And they usually shape up after

that; it's quite amazing. They understand a lot more than what you'd think. I don't know that they know their names, but sometimes you think they do. They're just enjoyable year-round, and what a great life. I can walk across the driveway to work. I get to walk outside and see nature all the time. I get to see births, animals that behave properly. I'm home. I got to raise my kids in this environment. It's nice seeing people that bring their kids along, and they're just so tickled pink to see calves or cows, and, you know, little kids, half the time, their first words are "moo" instead of "mom." It's just totally enjoyable.

I can't imagine giving it up. My husband keeps wanting me to; he says, "You need to be retiring. You can't be doing this forever." But it'll be quite a while longer; I can't look at 250 families and tell them, "Tough luck. Go find your milk somewhere else." Because I don't think they're going to find it. At least not what I consider is best. I don't know all the other cowshare farmers, so I really shouldn't be talking out of not knowing. But I don't know of many others that want to keep what I think is pure—it's grass. A lot view it as a business, and I can understand that way of thinking. I show appreciation to the cows; I do tell each and every one of them, as they're leaving the barn, "Thank you for what you do. We appreciate you. Have a great night. Go eat some grass, and God watch over you."

FTCF: How far away do people travel to get their shares at Dairy Delight?

KRIS UNGER: The closest I have is down on the corner. She's what, a mile away, so she's very fortunate. And the furthest is probably a good hour and a half drive both ways. We've got people from: DeWitt, Mason, Jackson, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, all kinds of suburbs in Detroit, Clausen, Flushing, Flint, Fenton, Clarkston, and Clarksville.

Fortunately, a lot of families set up car-pool groups. Personally, I like to see groups of about four people/families, because that gets each family here once a month. In some car pools each family's cooler with milk goes back to a central location and then they go there to pick up their cooler. Some of them live close enough that the night before, they do texting between each other or e-mailing; take your bottles over to the person that's going to be picking up the milk that week. Then when the pick-up person gets back home, they call the others and say, "Your milk's here."



Some are close enough that they actually go to each person's house, pick up bottles and coolers; come to the dairy get their milk; and drop them back off at each family's homes.

It is longer on that day for the drivers, but the rest of the time, it's delivered to your door.

FTCF: What kind of complaints have people had about their milk?

KRIS UNGER: Once in a while, not very often, people call and say their milk is not lasting as long as it usually does. I'll double-check at this end, and make sure that my bulk tank temperature's right, that the equipment's clean. I'll check with other people that pick up on that day to see if they have a problem with their milk. So far, I've never found a problem at *my* end. I'm not saying that it can't be here. As an example, I had two people calling, picked up milk on the same day, the same day my sister picks up. And her milk was fine. Well, I suggested that they put a thermometer in their refrigerator, and it turned out that one of their refrigerators was sitting at 54 degrees F. And the other person didn't know until this happened that when they shut the door on their refrigerator, the two 40-watt light bulbs inside were not turning off as they should.

The most frequent complaint is when we switch from hay to grass because there's a real taste change. I try to remember to put a sign out, just to remind folks that it's going to change. I think it was last year, I forgot to put up the notice and I did get about five phone calls that week. They were cute, they said things like, "I just want you to know, I think there's something a little off with that last tank of milk." Somebody else, when I mentioned the switch to pasture, she goes, "Oh, I thought it was just because I was pregnant." The kids seem to notice the difference the most, from hay to grass, and they say that the milk tastes like the cows smell. So, what some of the moms have done is give them a straw, so their nose isn't over the glass. Once there was a significant taste change—like the milk was sour. What I finally figured out was that there was a lot of lamb's quarter in the pasture. I moved the cows to a different pasture, and the milk cleared up.

FTCF: How long have you been doing Dairy Delight? Any thoughts about transition?

KRIS UNGER: We're now in our 16th year, and it's been great. We have established a reliable service, and there are reliable families that depend on our operation to supply them with their fresh unprocessed milk. However, I know this cannot keep on forever. Whether I retire, or something happens, somebody else has got to be able to take it over. And I know there are people out there that want to operate a dairy. But it is really difficult to start from scratch. No way most could afford to get in it now, much less ship milk and make nothing for it. I know there has got to be someone that would love to do what we're doing at Dairy Delight. It wouldn't really cost them anything to get in, except to

buy the cows, the replacements. Because the cowshare owners own the cows. They wouldn't have to buy those. They could just pay me a monthly rent fee or whatever. Things would have to be worked out, as to how tractors work, or if they have got his own, or that type of stuff, but I know there's somebody.

FTCF: What would you consider important to retaining your shareholders?

KRIS UNGER: Quality of the milk, for one. I do have a lot of people tell me that they obtained milk from someplace else, and in three or four days that milk had already soured. I ask my people, "If *ever* you have a problem with the milk, call me, so we can find out if there's a problem at this end. I think the one time that families let me know something was wrong, we found that the timer on the bulk tank beater bar wasn't working right. Some families got skim, and some got all cream. I wouldn't have known unless they had called me.

I think that having a twelve-hour window to be able to get their milk helps. I have heard that with a lot of the dairies that do deliveries, you've got 15 minutes or 30 minutes to be at the distribution point, and if not, tough luck, you're out of your milk. At Dairy Delight, I'm willing to work with people, and I think that the friendships that we've built make a difference. The cowshare owners care about what's happening here, and I care about them. The sharing of information. Everybody's here for health. They are not here just for fun. Some may be because they think it's cool, but all in all, it's for health. People stay with Dairy Delight. It's quality of milk, ease of pick-up time, and, we're just a family.

Thank you, Kris, for taking the time to share your dairying experiences of providing quality fresh, unprocessed milk to so many Michigan families.

Keep watching for more conversations with experienced farmers who are supplying fresh milk to their neighbors.