

Raw Milk

There's a lot going on at Windy Acres Dairy, and it's more than just milk

by Megan French

Take Powell Butte Highway to Ochoco Highway, then Highway 126 to Lamonta Road and Stahancyk Lane. The directions to Windy Acres Dairy Farm sound like all the others routes I have ever taken. What the map failed to mention was the wide paddocks of Powell Butte, the old twisted juniper pines of Ochoco Highway, the valley views as you crest the mountains to Highway 126, and the old milling equipment, beautifully rusted with that perfect farmland patina, of Lamonta Road. As I take my final left onto Stahancyk Lane, my destination does not disappoint. To the north, the Ochoco foothills rest on the horizon; to the east, acres and acres of alfalfa lay drying in the sun, and to the west and south — sun-stained grazing land.







Billie Johnson with one of the ladies.



Sheep and lambs at Windy Acres.



Farm fresh raw milk, eggs, butter and more for a great breakfast.

Billie Johnson, Windy Acres' owner, suggested I be there by 6:30 a.m. to participate in the milking. As I pull into the driveway, I see her maneuvering in and out of the milking parlor. I park and immediately change into my work boots. It seems like it may be that type of morning.

Johnson purchased the farm with her husband in 1994 more for hobby than a career. After nearly 10 years and many evolutions, the farm was up to 44 head, one milking parlor, and one Grade A operational dairy certification. The first cows were milked on one dull Halloween evening in 2003 when the farmers needed a little excitement.

By 2005, the farm was up to 60 dairy cows and 20 heifers nearing milking age. But after one fateful day, the herd was down to seven cows and Johnson was on her own. Her husband sold the herd and left the farm; she was left with the rejected cows that the buyers would not take and 20 acres of land to maintain herself.

Johnson grew up on a cattle farm in Monument, Oregon, and was a farmer by heart. So when she was handed lemons, she made the best lemonade she could. This pivotal moment was used as an opportunity to reframe her business.

Johnson decided she would no longer sell her milk to the local creamery to be pasteurized and mixed with many other farms products; she would sell nutrient rich raw milk to her customers.

Raw milk is non-pasteurized, non-homogenized milk, which means that the milk does not get heated to ultra-high pressures and the molecules do not get broken down so that the fat does not separate from the milk proteins.

In Oregon, raw milk sales are illegal. But Johnson did not have a facility for pasteurization. After much research and discovering the incredible health benefits of raw milk, Johnson approached the Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund to draft a legal document so she could sell her milk.

The "herd share" model allowed Johnson to legally distribute her products to customers. In essence, the herd share agreements state that the farm (in this case Windy Acres Dairy) is responsible for the care and health of the animal and that the customer has partial ownership of that animal. So, all herd share members become part owners of the farm. This allows the members to have access to all of the products from the farm. The owners then are given a suggested donation for compensating the farmer for her time.

I make my way into the milking parlor and already Johnson has scooted six cows into their respected stalls. "The girls" are happily chomping away at their breakfast and the other cows wait anxiously at the entrance. I can see that the cows enjoy this morning ritual with Johnson.

With great efficiency and confidence, Johnson sprays and swabs iodine, soothes and talks with the girls and has the teat cups on before I can even ask how her morning is going. The milk flows through the vacuum tube to the next room over from the parlor where it is held in a cooling tank before being transferred to milk jugs.

With raw milk, a few crucial factors play into the health of the product. The first is the feed and care of the animal; the second is the cleanliness and care in milking. The cows at Windy Acres are not given antibiotics because they don't need them. They roam freely on acres of pasture and are not confined in unsanitary, overcrowded situations. They are also not given hormones because Johnson does not feel the need to increase the cows' natural flow. The cows also live their lives on pasture and are supplemented orchard grass in the winter when it does not grow in the harsh Central Oregon conditions.

Johnson's milking parlor is also kept meticulously clean. She cleans the parlor, the equipment and every cow before every milking. She is also frequently inspected by the Oregon Department of Agriculture and is held to high standards. Johnson embraces and believes in these high standards.

Windy Acres Dairy is more than a dairy farm: It's a hub for education. Johnson teaches me the milking process step by step, taking care to point out every detail along the way. She will do the same for anyone.

She also frequently hosts events, such as the annual Dairy Days and The Freedom of Choice: Joel Salatin farm to table dinner and lecture. Dairy Days is a yearly event full of good food, good dairy and family-friendly workshops



to teach farm visitors about soap making, cheese making, wool spinning and more.

In 2015, Johnson also hosted farmer and farm advocate Joel Salatin. Salatin is known as "America's most famous farmer"

and has been an inspiration for farmers and non-farmers alike. The event took place on a beautiful summer day and featured informational booths, a pop-up farmers' market, a farm to table dinner and an open invitation for all who wanted to hear Salatin speak.

Johnson is always thinking, creating and welcoming any curious mind into her life. Along with her events, she also makes a wide variety of products, including yogurt, butter, cream cheese, ghee and hard cheeses. She also raises turkeys, chickens, pigs and sheep. She will cook you lunch at the drop of a hat and call you in the middle of the night to help with a birthing.

As we finished up in the milking parlor, Johnson insisted I come in the house for a chocolate colostrum (the super nutrient dense enzyme rich milking of a cow) and to meet Poodle, the fiercest little bull-chasing farm dog you ever met.

This work is not for the faint of heart. There are early hours, large animals, regulations, and unsavory gifts from the girls while milking, but Johnson does it every morning and does it with the utmost care.

For information on herdshare and Dairy Days at Windy Acres Dairy visit windyacresdairy.com.

Megan French is a lover of all things pine scented and grown in Oregon soil. She is a gardener, rabbit wrangler and avid canner.

All Windy Acres Dairy photos by Ruben Sanchez at Absolute Studio



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