



Photo by Phil Audibert

Longtime employee, Amy Beaston cuts a block of Marshall Farms cheese as Nancy Cooper prepares a deli sandwich in the background. Marshall Farms produces about 10,000 pounds of cheese every spring. The vast majority of the farm's organic milk products is purchased by Horizon.

What's important in Unionville these days? "Politics!" blurt both Deanne and Keith in unison. "Local, national, and it's great because you have a lot of people who have been through many different things in their life...it's pretty interesting," says Deanne, who wisely refuses to take sides.

Obamacare and budget cuts to local schools top the list. Predictably, there are disagreements between 'cometos' and 'here before.' A popular bumper sticker that reads, "I Don't Care How You Did It Up North," is, on the surface, an amusing commentary on how some folks move into a community with pre-conceived notions on how everything should be run. But it's also a comment on the intractability of some locals to even consider the mere consideration that there might be another way.

Deanne and Keith stay out of it. "They're great people," says Deanne, of her regulars. "They feel so strongly about their beliefs that sometimes they get offended. People from other parts of the United States, like Ohio or Vermont, come down, and they have their own ideas. And then we have people who have been here their whole lives; their grandfathers, their fathers and them, and of course they have their different ideas."

Asked if she and Keith have become the unofficial mayors of Unionville, they both fairly shout "No!" in unison. Keith was born and raised here; she was an Army brat, moving as many as 10 times by the time her parents

retired in Spotsylvania County. "And I knew I didn't want to move around anymore, so I married a dairy farmer whose roots are well into the soil here." She looks appreciatively at Keith, and adds she is grateful that their three children have friends and connections to this one community, not a dozen scattered all over the map.

"Keith and I both, we always look for ways to work within our community. We feel like it's important. When we do that, it comes around; it's networking. When we do that, it's all helping each other." And that explains why the cheese is not readily available in the area. Other than the store at Unionville and Yoder's in Pratts, there are only a handful of retail outlets that carry Marshall Farms cheese. "I decided to really focus on connecting and talking to people here and making the store run, 'cause I can't do the store the way I want to and do the cheese the way I want to. So I stay local with the cheese," explains Deanne.

And that's because, well, it is local. It is the slice that makes the pie whole, from the blade of grass up to the cow to the milk to the tank to the truck to the local deli to the ad hoc community center at the crossroads.

Future plans? "We don't want to rush it," she glances sideways to Keith, "but we would really like to do something more community-based, a bigger storefront or something and have it be a natural organic venue of local foods. I think people would come from all over to get good food, good products, and they know how it's grown, where it's come from. That's my dream."

Keith rolls his eyes, not because of her dream, but because it's snowing...again.

Marshall Farms

“A whole lot of work just to have a little cream in your coffee”



Keith Marshall does the farming and milking; Deanne tends to the cheese and day-to-day operation of their deli, restaurant and cheese outlet in Unionville.

Photo by Phil Audibert

There's snow in the air...again. It's not one of those big dumps to which we are becoming rapidly accustomed; just a minor event. But we all know how that goes.

For Keith Marshall it's still a major inconvenience. He's had to pre-position feed for several hundred cattle on 1,500 acres of pasture land from Unionville to the outskirts of Orange. He's pre-mixed rations for the 250 to 300 cows he's milking at the barn. He's double-checked this and prepared for that, and that's just the work they had to do before the first flake flew! It's a good thing too, because that "one to three" that was forecast turned into eight inches on the ground.

Still, this is nothing compared to that February 5-6 dump. Or, how about the now-infamous Christmas blizzard of '09? Keith's wife Deanne rolls her eyes. "While everybody else is snuggled up watching movies, eating popcorn, they're out," she says of Keith and his crew. "The last snowstorm (Christmas), they were out all night, all day, all night, all day, making sure the milk truck can come in and out, making sure that the snow stays off the feed, making sure all the cows have water. It's very intense."

When that monster hit, Keith says he was up at 1:30 that Saturday morning, plowing the road so the milk hauler could get in, load up and free tank space for the next milking. The hauler was going nowhere, but at least the milk was safe and the cows weren't bawling. "No matter what happens outside, those guys are still on the road," continues Deanne. "These guys are still out there milking. It doesn't matter." She pauses a beat to make a point. "They don't *not* milk."

At least they didn't lose power, which, even though they have generators, turns a major pain in the butt into a royal one. And, luckily, they did-



Photo by Phil Audibert

The Marshall Farms hat has become quite the world traveler, as regular deli customers take pictures of the ball cap in various situations while they're on vacation. The photos are plastered all over the store.



Contributed photo

A Marshall Farms cow tends to her newborn calf in the spring. The calf will nurse naturally for a few days before being fed a cultured yogurt that will strengthen its immune system.

n't have any roof collapses like some of their neighbors.

Even under the best of weather conditions, dairying is hard, hard work. In addition to planting, growing, harvesting and hauling feed; in addition to breeding, birthing and raising healthy calves; in addition to dealing with mountains of red tape and a volatile market that is at its lowest point in 30 years, you still have to milk... "twice a day; holidays, you name it."

At Marshall Farms they milk 20 at a time, 100 per hour. "You're talking about almost three hours," says Keith, adding that it's even more in the spring and summer, when they start at 4:30 a.m. and don't get out till 8:30. Then they do it all over again at 3:30 in the afternoon...everyday: holidays, birthdays, flu days...everyday. Keith shakes his head wearily and sums up dairying: "A whole lot of work just to have a little cream in your coffee in the morning."

But this cream is different.

"How so?" you say.

Well... in addition to all the other things that commercial dairies do, Marshall Farms has added an extra layer of responsibility and compliance. It has gone totally organic, from the first step in the milk manufacturing process to the last. This means they are subject to a certification process and yearly inspections by the USDA's National Organic Program.

"I thought that was probably a good direction to take, and I have no regrets from it," says Keith of the decision to go this extra mile. That's despite the fact that "in making the transition, it's extremely difficult. It takes three years to transition your land and one year to transition your cattle... And because you have to feed organic feeds, it's pretty expensive." In other words, you're paying the extra bucks of going organic as much as three years before you reap its benefits.

Consider, if you will, that a cow is nothing more than a factory that converts its feed into milk and beef. It makes sense that if you want to produce a quality dairy or meat product, you want to control what goes into that feed. After all, "You are what you eat," says Keith. And that's just as true for cattle as it is for humans.

Keith and Deanne have just finished eating a superb lunch at their Marshall Farms Corner Deli at the intersection of Routes 20 and 522, at the very epicenter of Orange County. The following exchange is verbatim.

"So, no commercial fertilizers," says Keith of their pasture, hay, and grain crop lands.

"Which is great," confirms Deanne.

"...no herbicides, pesticides..." continues Keith.

"It's wonderful," she echoes.

"...no genetically modified grains..." Keith ticks another one off the list.

"It's wonderful," repeats Deanne, adding "Keith says he can tell the difference in the health of the cows. It's more of



Photo by Phil Audibert

Getting ready for yet another snowstorm, Shannon Arnold breaks off flakes of hay for some yearlings in a rented pasture near Unionville. The Marshalls run between 500 and 600 head of cattle on 1,500 acres of owned and rented land.

a preventative. It's like you taking your vitamins and exercising to stay well."

Keith agrees, saying he's seen "a large difference. First off you have to maintain your cattle on pasture; that's a large requirement to being organic. And that in itself is a big difference to confining your cattle in a feed lot and bringing their feed to them. And I think their immune systems are stronger for the fact that you're not putting things in there that are really not natural. I'm not saying you don't have your problems. Certain animals don't do quite as well, and for that reason you cull through them." Just like anything else.

"No hormones, no antibiotics..."

A common spring and summer ailment among cattle is pink eye. "I've found we've had less pink eye," observes Keith. "I don't know why, for whatever reason other than the fact that I think their immune system is a little bit stronger and can ward off most of it." At the milking barn, he points to a spherical stainless steel tank that looks something like an old Sputnik satellite. Keith explains.

"Organically, you have to feed calves cow's milk; you can't feed them milk replacement. So, what we do is, we capture the milk into this tank and then we culture it to yogurt, and we feed the yogurt to the calves. And the reason we do that is it makes their immune system stronger...It prevents the scours and pneumonia and things like that."

Breeding also makes a difference. The

Marshalls have found that a combination of Holstein, Jersey, Brown Swiss, Ayrshire and Swedish Red works well. And, as we drive the back roads of Unionville, Keith points to pastures that have been over-seeded with a wide variety of grasses. Cows graze these pastures rotationally.

He describes a scene, different from this bleak winter's day, when the weather is warmer and the cattle are knee-deep in lush, green grass. "It's the exercise, getting them off the concrete. Cattle like to roam anyway. Actually from spring to fall, you never see the cattle; they're always out there somewhere." He points to the pastures beyond the milking parlor. When it's time to milk, "they'll single file and you'll see a half a mile of cattle coming...We bring 'em in, milk 'em and turn 'em right around and send them right on back out."

In the winter, of course, they feed extra. Back at the barn, a giant tub grinder mixes hay, haylage, organically grown grain, and minerals into a complete feed ration.

"You are what you eat."

Marshall Farms sells 98 percent of its all-organic milk to Horizon, a huge organic dairy concern that taps 500 family farms like this one nationwide. You can find Horizon milk



Photo by Phil Audibert

Jay Marshall (left) got into the dairy business in the late 1970's, turning the day to day operation over to his son Keith. Currently the Marshalls milk between 250 and 300 cows daily.

products at all area Food Lions, and they pay the Marshalls a premium price for their milk. But Keith Marshall hastens to add that "your expenses are a lot more. I think in the long run, it's an improvement, but it's a lot more challenging and it's a lot more difficult. You can't run to the feed store, when you run out of feed, and you can't run to the co-op if you run out of fertilizer. You have to be self-sufficient, and you have to plan ahead in order to have those things that you will need in the future. And you can't rely on your neighbors as much either, because they're not organic. So anything they have is not permissible."

The Marshalls have also "vertically integrated," meaning that they have more control of the production process from the blade of grass in the field all the way up to the glass of milk on your table, or in their case... the wedge of cheese on your plate.

To learn where it all started, you have to go back to 1958, when Keith's dad, Jay Marshall started hauling milk for a living. He soon realized, as his milk hauling business grew, that this was just one piece of a much larger pie. So, in 1979, he started the dairy, and added another slice. Since then, the elder Marshall marvels at "the accomplishments that we've made here." Keith has taken over the dairy operation; another son runs the family trucking and tractor-trailer maintenance facility, and Jay's daughter-in-law, Deanne, takes care of the cheese business and retail outlet, delicatessen and restaurant at the Unionville crossroads.

Keith laughs, "That was her idea. I didn't want anything to do with it." Deanne looks at him as if he were fibbing, which he is, and says "We wanted a value-added product to our farm. ...We wanted to market our name a little bit just to help preserve the family farm, 'cause the way the milk industry is going, it's very difficult to stay in business."

Keith confirms this market volatility. "You can see 50-75 percent price swings, and that's what's really difficult with agriculture; you're at the mercy of that. You do well one year and then you have two years of bad prices...It wears on you, and right now, dairy is probably as low as it's been for 30 years. It has really been pretty hard. And we've been blessed. Going organic has made our situation a little better."

It was back in the mid 90's when Keith decided to go the rotational grazing route with his dairy herd. They paid

neighbor and renowned sheep's cheese maker, Dr. Patricia Elliott (see Jan. 24, 2008 *Insider*) a visit. "This is what we're doing: we're raising our cows on grass, we're interested in doing some cheese," they remember saying. Dr. Elliott was supportive; taught them the craft. They joined the American Cheese Society, and "submitted our cheese in competition just to see where we were at and we ended up winning awards the first year we were in," says Deanne, barely concealing her surprise.

It grew from there. "After we started making the cheese,



Photo by Phil Audibert

"You are what you eat." Marshall Farms employee, Jimmy Arnold mixes "a total ration" of hay, haylage, minerals and organically grown grain in a giant tub mixer at Marshall Farms in Unionville.

we started going to wine festivals, farmer's markets. I started meeting other people who do their own special things, that I sell in the store...It started with me pounding the pavement with my little ice box with some cheese in it. 'Taste my cheese. This is what we do. This is what we believe in,'" remembers Deanne. "What really helped was the persistence, going out every weekend to the farmer's markets, talking to anybody that will listen to you...you get the eye contact; you're meeting the farmer. They say, 'Who are you? And I say 'Well, I'm the dairy farmer's wife.'"

And they found that people like that; they like to know where their food is coming from. "I think on average, your food travels 1,600 miles," observes Keith. "That's a pretty big carbon footprint." That's also a pretty big question mark as to the origin of what you're putting into your mouth!

So now, when the grass is at its greenest and most lush, in late spring, the Marshalls will send two tankers of their sweetest, all-organic, whole milk to a small cheese maker in the mountains of Western North Carolina. The truck driver

will also deliver a package from Yoder's in Madison County: organic herbs and spices that Deanne has picked out. These will be mixed in with the cheese to make several different flavors such as sun-dried tomato and basil or garlic, chive, and parsley.

About a month later, those two tankers of milk will come back as 40-pound blocks and wheels of Monterey Jack and Cheddar cheese. Deanne and her two full-time helpers, Amy Beaston and Nancy Cooper ("I couldn't do without them; they're excellent; they really care about the job"), will

cut the blocks into pieces, package, and sell them. And they'll take them to area wine festivals and help you pair that bottle of Virginia wine you bought with their cheese. And they'll tell you exactly where that cheese came from...a pasture in Orange County.

"That is our milk product," says Keith of their local cheese business, even though it only accounts for 2 percent of their production. Still, he has little interest in selling milk by the glass, which he can't do anyway because of Virginia law.

The store is more than a cheese outlet. Located at the center of a square bounded on four corners by Culpeper, Charlottesville, Richmond, and Fredericksburg, Marshall Farms, at the crossroads of 522 and 20, is at the center of everything. "And we get people who come quite far to come here, just to see what it's all about," says Deanne proudly.

It's also a community center.

The walls are festooned with posters and postcards, clippings and the now famous photos of the Marshall Farms ball cap in places as remote as Iraq, South Africa, China and Australia. At any given time there will be a couple of cop cars or ambulances parked in the lot. "I always heard, you know it's a good place to eat when you see the policemen and the emergency workers, all those people," winks Deanne.

Tradesmen stop in; the cable guy, local farmers, bikers on holiday. There's Wi-Fi access, fresh-brewed Green Mountain Coffee, Virginia wines and other products by the dozens, and a breakfast and lunch menu that offers tasty and healthy choices that are neither greasy spoon nor over-the-top nuts and berries. Their Cheddar Bacon Burger is the new winner of the *Insider's* Best Bacon Cheeseburger in the county.

And then there's the morning coffee crew. Usually waiting for Deanne to open up in the morning at 7 a.m., these mostly retired folks, sit at the tables, nurse their coffee and discuss what's important in Unionville these days.