

CHEESE, ICE CREAM, SOAP: VALUE ADDED TO CROFTING

The *Bringing Back Dairy* conference was held at Ceann na h-Àirigh on Grimsay from 8 - 10 March, with 22 participants from the Uists, Lewis and the mainland. The practical side of small-scale dairy was explored in talks, discussions and a workshop. Some of the high points were:

Animals on the Land

Whatever animal you keep, it needs to be the right breed for the land - this is easier on the beast, on the crofter and on the wallet. Smaller is better. Anything they can do in the Nordic countries is physically possible here.

Sheep: don't try Frieslands, they can't stand the wet. Any breed can be milked - note the ewes with the healthiest lambs and try them. Texels are quite good, even Hebrideans can be milked. Sheep's milk is richer than cows' in protein and fat - 10 litres of sheep milk can produce 2 kilos of cheese, but cow's only 1 kilo. Sheep cheese does not have to taste of sheep!

Goats: The group learned a lot of useful details about raising goats - they do need some shelter like a polytunnel. They can be bred at 18 months, and can 'run through' into a second year of milking. With good care a good animal can produce 3L of milk daily.

Cows Recommended were Dexters, Shetlands, Belties. Highlanders' milk is rich, makes top-notch ice cream!

Any milking animal needs some extra input as they are being pushed harder - pay attention to grazing management and good access to water and shelter.

All about Milk

There's a lot to know about milk that affects how you work with it, whether making cheese, pasteurising or freezing. Milk products are complex and full of living organisms; managing the bacteria and enzymes is what makes the different products and flavours. The group learned a lot about the structure and behaviour of milk.

Raw milk? Pasteurised? The conclusion was that making raw milk products for sale is not a good idea anymore, for two reasons. It's expensive, as the cost of fortnightly testing has risen from £5 to £40 due to changes in legislation. Also modern people have weaker immune and digestive systems than in the past, and are less able to tolerate diverse bacteria. But pasteurising (64° C for 30 minutes or 72° for 15 seconds) can be done with a bucket in a boiler.

Facilities can be very small. Isle of Lewis Cheese built their entire dairy for about £5,000 (using an existing building) by sourcing used materials and equipment. There must be a milking stand and yoke, whether milking by hand or by machine. Some prize-winning Swedish dairies are housed in small wooden cottages. Keeping things clean and organised is essential to a good product.

Value

Added value comes from well-made, distinctive products with a good story. Dairy products vary greatly in return on investment of time and money. Because liquid milk has a guaranteed market and no storage/cash flow problems, with low labour/ time requirements it is the most cost effective way to sell milk. All the other products are costly in time/labour/storage and most cause cash flow problems. The best return comes from ice cream, then butter, hard cheeses, soft cheeses, then yoghurt (huge supermarket competition!) and kefir. Value also comes from figuring out what kinds of production and what daily/annual schedule work for you, and wasting nothing. For example, at West Highland Dairy, they kept lambs for only 3 weeks and sold them on for finishing, but others might want to include meat in their business plan. We tasted a Swedish cheese selling at £50 per kilo. There was some discussion of other possible croft products from soap to salami.

Viable food businesses enrich the community, provide food security for the area, and offer interesting tourism opportunities.

Going Forward

The cheesemaking workshop group tended toward two different models:

- 1) get on with it, get started and work cooperatively - one croft could have the stock and milk, another could make product.
- 2) seek funding and establish a dairy.

The group plans to meet up again in 4 months at Ceann na h-Àirigh to sample their hard cheese now being aged at West Highland Dairy and see where their thoughts have led them.

The overall view of the presenters was that small can be high-value and manageable. There's no need to 'think big' - make a good product, don't be pressured into expanding more than you want to. Small dairying can be a good add-on to a crofting business.

Thanks to the exceptional presenters for bringing their expertise to Uist:

Kathy Biss of West Highland Dairy (Wester Ross), Dave Eastwood of Lewis Cheese Company (Back), Wendy Barrie: Scottish Cheese Trail / Scottish Food Guide (Fife), Bosse Dahlgren: traditional farming and native breeds (Fife). Thanks also to Uibhistich Ena MacDonald and Phil Jubb for sharing their experience, to Alasdair MacEachen for reference material, and to SNH (Scotland's Natural Larder programme) for financial support.