

LOCAL FOOD HEROES

Picture: Mikal Ludlow 092616_1



Rob Warren at Oakey Farm

Stephen Wheeler, commercial manager at speciality food company *Mise en Place*, now part of Cheltenham-based Creed Foodservice, shares some of the successes and challenges of local food producers

IF you take doorstep delivery of fresh milk in Gloucestershire, the chances are some of your milk has come from Oakey Farm in Moreton Valence in the vale of Berkeley. Rob and Sue Warren and their teenage triplets have lived in their rambling 15th century farmhouse and been dairy farming since 1997, after their search for the right farm took them as far as Utah, USA.

Like many farming families, Rob is third generation on the land; his grandfather having started as a tenant farmer in the 1920s.

I chatted to Rob and Sue about the challenges of modern dairying in their farmhouse kitchen with Silas, their black Labrador, listening in at our feet.

In the face of falling milk prices, and persistent cheap imports, Rob felt that survival depended upon scale efficiencies so three years ago they took the decision to increase the size of their Holstein-Friesian herd from 140 head to 400.

As dairy farms in the UK now average around 100 milking cows, the Warrens are running an impressively large operation, having invested millions of pounds in the most modern milking and animal housing facilities available.

The herd at Oakey Farm

now send 10,000 litres per day of milk to a bottling plant in Tewkesbury – that's around 17,500 pints on Gloucestershire doorsteps; residential, catering, wholesale and retail.

"We had to grow to preserve our livelihood," said Rob.

"Farm-gate prices of milk are everything. Our current return is around 25p per litre, which is better than 2002 when it went as low as 17p – but 25p is the same price as 15 years ago.

"Of course our efficiencies had to increase."

Oakey Farm employs five full-time herdsman and dairymen, leaving Rob time to concentrate on running a thoroughly modern business and stock management.

At least one newborn calf a day is delivered on the farm's 'maternity ward'. Dairy farming in England has been swept up in the globalisation of food politics and pricing, "but on the plus side," says Rob, "we live in beautiful countryside, I don't commute to work, and I can make time to see our children growing up."

The Warrens are certainly local food heroes who have adapted their way of life to succeed in 21st century farming.

Mise en Place
THE SPECIALITY FOOD COMPANY

Bikers have a jolly old time

It's been a brilliant year for Jess' Ladies in Hardwicke. Not only have they won two Great Taste Awards but they're also going to star in *The Hairy Bikers' Christmas TV special*. **LUCY PARFORD** caught up with dairy farmer Jess Vaughan



L-R: Dave Myers, Di Louks, Mike and Jess Vaughan and Si King at Hardwicke Farm

HAIRY Bikers Simon King and Dave Myers have been touring the country to serve up a Christmas feast which celebrates great British food and produce.

Their epic journey, which took them to the wilds of Norfolk and to a building site in inner city London, also involved a pit stop in Gloucestershire.

Si and Dave pulled up at Hardwicke Farm which has been the home of Jess Vaughan's family for three generations.

It is where she produces Jess' Ladies Organic Farm Milk which won gold at this year's Great Taste Awards.

In their Christmas special – *The Hairy Bikers Celebrate The Twelve Days Of Christmas* – the celebrity chefs interpret the traditional song through the medium of food.

For *A Partridge In A Pear Tree*, it's a stuffed partridge served up at BBC Radio Norfolk; *Five Gold Rings* inspires them to cook a gut-busting breakfast for construction workers on the Olympic site; *Six Geese A-laying* sees them dressed up as pantomime dames and they join a bunch of winter swimmers for *Seven Swans A-swimming*.

Jess, who has around 80 dairy cows which she affectionately calls her 'ladies' and cares for with her dad, Mike, was chosen for *Eight Maids A-milking*.

"They were looking for a female dairy farmer and there aren't too many around," she laughs.

"The day was quite a long but very exciting one, with nearly 12 hours of filming.

"It was a large production crew but the ladies didn't mind the cameras at all – they were very well behaved considering

they had a kitchen in their field. They were all quite intrigued by it.

"Si and Dave cooked rum and raisin pannacotta, it was really delicious and we got to try the food on camera.

"They even came milking with us in the afternoon and seemed to really enjoy their day on the farm. It was an amazing and unforgettable day for us."

Jess got to ride around the field on the back of the *Hairy Bikers'* motorbikes and they left a lasting impression by naming a newborn calf *Pannacotta* who will grow up with the rest of the ladies.

Jess, 28, has lived at the farm all her life and moved into organic production nearly four years ago.

The business was awarded two gold stars for its semi-skimmed milk and one gold star for its double cream in this year's Great Taste Awards.

It supplies shops throughout the south west, including *Over Farm shop*, *The Natural Grocery Store* in Cheltenham and *Tortworth Estate shop*, just off junction 14 of the M5.

It also supplies milk to the *National Galleries* in London, and has a stall at *Stroud Farmers' Market* every Saturday.

As a farmer, Jess won't be having much of a break over Christmas but she wouldn't swap her job for the world.

"We get a bit of time off with the bottling because the shops are shut, but I will be back to milking and stuff and working on Christmas Day," she says. "I'll just have a bit of extra Christmas cake."

■ For more details, see the website www.theladiesorganicmilk.co.uk

■ *The Hairy Bikers Celebrate The Twelve Days Of Christmas* is on BBC Two on Wednesday at 9pm.



Jess' ladies Hetty and Banger will do anything for their owner