

The Lifestyle  
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What does dairy farming mean to mean to me?

I feel my perspective on dairy farming may be slightly different than the masses because I married into it with no farming background. I grew up in farm country and around animals – dogs, cats, horses – and always had a natural affinity to animals and the outdoors. Early on, my parents instilled in me the knowledge of where our food came from, not just the grocery store. We lived on a small horse farm, so I always had my fair share of laborious chores. A hard day's work was not outside of my capacity because I always had some type of job working in nearby horse stables. I was an active 4-H member throughout my childhood and enjoyed competitively showing horses through the 4-H local, regional, and state level. Somewhere in my early twenties I met and fell in love with, simply put, *my farmer*, and he would forever change my outlook on life through this thing called *Dairy Farming*. Just like growing up with show horses, I quickly learned dairy farming was a lifestyle, which I promptly embraced and have never looked back! Don't mistake me; while I embraced it, there was still a learning curve.

That curve would take shape in many forms; the continuous hours of work that never seemed to end, the fact that the cows are not considered pets when their milk lifecycle has concluded, and that just because the milking was done for the day it did not mean my farmer's day was over. There was always a field to be worked up, crops to be brought in, animals that required attention, and equipment that needed to be worked on.

I was a quick study on the industry, on our herd, the crops, and the seasons. My farmer was patient and kind with my endless questions and my need for a better understanding of our lifestyle. My family, friends, and co-workers would find my lifestyle fascinating with sessions of endless questions. I quickly became an activist on all things dairy with anyone who would listen. Explaining in depth the process of dairy farming in relation to my farmer's dairy. I would passionately explain why the industry was so undervalued because the work is hard – I mean hard, like the average person would never last a week on a dairy farm let alone a day – and no one gets *rich* milking cows. With esteem, I would tell the story of my husband's farm that had been in the family for five generations and how most dairy farms are family heirlooms that are passed down with care from one generation to the next. I would carefully explain why their work should be celebrated because the labor, while bountiful in honesty, can be unforgiving and leave you broken at times, but you – we – push on because of the love we have for our lifestyle.

Over the years while watching, gathering, and helping, I have learned the power of patience. The kind of patience you get from watching your favorite heifer bloom with her first calf, and the promise she holds as a productive member of the herd. The kind of patience you must have in early May when all you crave is homegrown sweet corn but realize it will be months before you can taste the buttery sweetness of your crop. The kind of patience you must have when all you want to do is vent to your husband about a miserable day at work, but know it will have to wait because he won't be home until well after you have gone to bed because it is silage season.

The years have also taught me unrelenting strength, the kind of strength that comes from deep down inside that allows you to push through the tough times. The kind of strength that you call upon when you watch your husband work in vain on a calf that won't make it, all while tears are streaming down his face as he is yelling at the small lifeless creature not to give up. The kind of strength you call upon when you read the latest market report on milk prices and you wonder how you are going to pay the bills next month. The kind of strength you need when gazing over the steering wheel of the tractor you see yet another storm system moving in and you are all ready weeks behind schedule because of the wet spring.

I have also learned about deep down earth-moving joy. The kind of joy that falls over you when you walk into the calf barn and twenty little faces are imploring you to feed them. The kind of joy you feel when the last acre of corn is in after an unrelenting season. The kind of joy you feel when you are able to nurse a sick cow back from the brink and put her back in the lineup to be a productive member of the herd. The kind of joy you feel when you walk into your barn and the sweet smell of fresh cut hay washes over you.

So you ask, what does dairy farming mean to me...it means that warm, sweet breath over my shoulder of my favorite Jersey following me ever so carefully through the barn as I push the herd into the parlor for my father-in-law. It means finding comfort while tucked tightly against my farmer in the cab of his tractor taking in the evening sunset and catching up on our day. It means spending holidays with other farmers and their families recounting on the bounty that our lifestyle has provided us over the year and planting dreams of the year to come. It means the ability to pass on a family legacy that has withstood the test of time, weather, and evolution. Finally, it means living a lifestyle *rich* with honesty, grace, and strength among people and animals that know no bounds of giving of themselves – I would never want to know any other way of life.