

# Dairy is ...

By Lisa Ruble

I cast my eyes over our sea of black and white spots. 80 Holsteins currently fill up our holding area, while 20 more patiently wait dry time and delivery. My mind ventures back to 1988, I had become the knees for an ailing, kindhearted, gentleman that I would forever idolize. After helping milk the cows for the first two weeks, Ray asked me to stop by the house before leaving one evening. He put two crisp twenty dollar bills in my hand. Dairy had become my first shot towards independence at 16 years old. It was my first job.

Later, as a daughter, wife, mother, and aunt, dairy has been the key to some of our favorite edibles. It's the creaminess to a warm bowl of potato soup on a cold, blustery, winter day, the basis for the cold refreshing confection that tops my waffle cone on a hot, sultry summer day. It is the sogginess to my Oreo, after having been dunked repeatedly. Dairy is that two inch, thin strip of mozzarella dangling on my chin after biting into my favorite piece of pizza pie.

Dairy is about creating a balance between the farm, the animals, and nature. It is about not upsetting that balance so that it can be here for future generations to love and enjoy. Dairy is about having the ability to nurture that generation. Whether it be mind, body, or spirit, for it is all necessary for a strong, viable future.

Dairy is a date night with the husband to check crops that we pray for abundance of to feed to our livestock. Or at times, it is him with me to check on an expectant mother, many times, ending with us aiding in delivering a new life. Then later, standing back in the shadows and admiring in awe at another little miracle that were we able to be a part of.

2010, six and a half years ago, my husband's dad died. He was the patriarch of the farm. He, up until the last couple of years before passing away, had managed the farm. While my husband and I had always been an important part, now it was our turn to be the farm's heart, and to manage it. Dairy was learning to live, thrive, and when the time came, learning to let go. It was digging deep within ourselves to make the farm work, and prove to others that we had what it took. Not that we had ever questioned our own ability for a minute, just that we needed to give others the chance to see us shine.

Dairy is being married to your husband for twenty years, and as aging, imaging your golden years rocking on the front porch with the amazing man that he has always been, and watching the crops grow. Dairy is about caring that your friends and family are as equally fulfilled with their own lives. Dairy is not the promise that situations will always be great, but that no situation is too difficult to not raise to the challenge.

Dairy is the bond between the people and its animals. It is seeing the beauty and uniqueness behind every big brown set of eyes that one encounters. It is to look at cow #48 and marvel over the fact that every single milking her and her daughter #96, bless the parlor with their presence at the exact same time. Dairy is knowing that as soon as my husband opens the gate for the first group that #44 is going to be first cow in, every single day, every single time. Dairy is knowing that when I say, "Killer has entered the parlor", that the meanest darn cow in the whole herd

has just walked in, so be on the lookout. Dairy is having a few very special cows with stories that are long enough to write books about.

Dairy is the relationship shared between a farmer and their large animal veterinarian. I keep my vet on speed dial. You'd be surprised how many holidays and special occasions we have asked him to come to the aid of one of our bovines. We have called him out on many weekends for sick animals, we've called him on holidays for milk fever cases following deliveries from some of our older cows, and we've called him in the middle of the night for calving difficulties. There is no end to the occasions that he has been needed, and no day or element that has ever kept him away from administering the necessary treatment to the beloved members of our herd.

Dairy is the thread that binds our family together, and the fabric that continues to hold it. It is often laughs in the milking parlor after just merely missing projectile poo, and it is occasionally the sharing of tears from our sadness and frustration of a life we so often have little control of. Dairy is the privilege of being able to be here, or near for our children throughout the years. It is, as they grow up, bestowing great responsibilities on them, whether it is feeding and handling livestock or manipulating large equipment around a farm field, and watching them master it.

Twenty-eight years later, I am still here. Dairy was not only my first job, but my only job, besides that of being a wife and mother. It is who I have become, and who I have a hard time visualizing myself to be without. Dairy is putting the animals ahead of my own personal needs. It is often a sacrifice that payment is many times in the form of the accomplishment itself. Dairy is my reason to get out of bed every morning, and the reason that sometimes I don't want to. Dairy is me.