Dairy farming is a way of life for the Verschaeves



Hereditary

From left, Lieven Verschaeve, Evy Verschaeve and Nele Verschaeve gather around their kitchen table, welcoming *The Citizen* for an afternoon chat about their dairy farm operation in Blyth. *(Scott Stephenson photo)*

By Scott Stephenson
The Citizen

In celebration of National Dairy Month, *The Citizen* has once again sent a scout to the farm of a Blyth-based family willing to spend a little time educating a local reporter on the ins and outs of a modern Canadian dairy farm.

Last year, the charming Hallahan clan brought *The Citizen* up to speed on their family's centuries-spanning journey on the forefront of Huron County's dairy scene. This year, the honour went to Evy Verschaeve and her parents, Lieven and Nele, who were kind enough to answer some questions over coffee at their farm on Harlock Line.

This isn't the first time that Evy has spoken to *The Citizen* on the subject of livestock - earlier this year, she offered up a detailed rundown on the wild and wooly world of 4-H sheep showing. But sheep are just a side hustle for the Verschaeves - as knowledgeable as Evy is about her small flock, her main focus is the family's herd of Holsteins, the care of which she approaches with the mildly intimidating intensity of a young person confident in their comprehension of a complex system.

An average day on the farm for Evy? "I get up, and I make coffee for my parents. And then I'll head out. Mom and dad get up a little bit before me - the first couple of cows in the parlour aren't that intensive. But then I'll go and I'll help Mom with milking the first lactation group. And then I'll start getting the second lactation cows in, and I'll clean out their pen, and then I'll feed calves milk, water, and grain. Then I clean off the milk parlour for breakfast, and then after breakfast, it depends on what needs to be done for the day. I clean barns and bed-up barns and everything, and just help out where I need to. So, yeah, that's it for the most part. And then in the evening, same thing happens again - I chase cows around, clean out stalls and pens, and then feed calves. And then a little bit of sheep and horse work in between, but this is Dairy Month," she explained.

Evy knows that one of the secrets to healthy, happy dairy cows is a proper diet full of local ingredients. "We grow a lot of our own feed. And we use lots of cover crops. We grow over the winter, after the fall crop comes off - like, rye, and oats, and all that," she told *The Citizen*. "Oats we take off in the fall yet, too, which helps for your soil health and everything. We like to keep everything pretty close - and then we also do brewer's grain, which is a byproduct from beer production." When they do need to buy feed, the Verschaeves always try to get the most local products possible.

The family does have some beef cattle, as well as a few doe-faced Jersey cows, but Lieven, Nele, and Evy are all-in when it comes to the almighty Holstein. These black and white super-producers are the backbone of Ontario's dairy industry. "They're the best producing type of cows," Evy pointed out. "And Holstein cows have really improved the fat and protein content of their milk. They're just athletes, honestly."

It's all obviously a lot of hard work. But it's also obvious that the Verschaeves don't just enjoy the art and effort of dairy farming - they're having a great time doing it together. Lieven and Nele immigrated to Canada from Belgium in 2002. Before making the big move, Lieven came to Canada, looking for the right place to start a new chapter in his family's farming saga. "I have no idea how many generations back we go with farming," he admitted. "It's just what we do." His search brought him to Huron County, and, like so

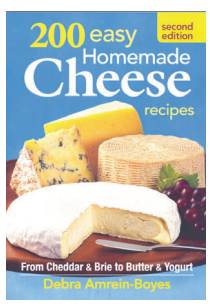
Continued on page 11







Stop in and check out our selection of books!



200 EASY HOMEMADE CHEESE RECIPES
Experience the joy of creating wonderful food from a simple ingredient: fresh milk. 400 pages of recipes and easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions. Recipes for soft, hard, fresh and ethnic cheeses as well as yogurt. **$27.95**

Available at
The Citizen
405 Queen St., Blyth
519-523-4792



Farm uses technology to monitor herd's health



Milking it

Under the watchful routines of Blythhill Farms in Blyth, these cows enjoy a moment of leisure. The herd's well-being is prioritized daily, with attentive handling, consistent routines, and fresh pasture rotations central to the farm's approach. *(Scott Stephenson photo)*

Continued from page 10

many other agriculturally-oriented individuals before him, realized that it was the place he wanted to be. "It's a beautiful country, a beautiful area - Huron County is awesome, and that's why we chose it," Lieven said. "Dairy farming is the biggest agricultural sector in Ontario. There are 3,000 dairy farmers in Ontario, and there are about 130 of them in Huron County."

The land was affordable and the soil was fertile - perfect conditions for the Verschaeves to grow their business and their family. As an added bonus, the Maitland River proved perfect for kayaking. "We started pretty small," he recalled. "We had a 20-kilogram quota and like, 20 cows. But, little by little, we grew and grew. A little bit more land, a little bigger quota, and a lot of hard work for me and Nele. The kids too, at a young age, were always outside and helping… the love of farming is in them."

Evy may be the youngest of her siblings, but, for years, she's been focusing her energy on developing the very particular set of skills required to be a successful dairy farmer, with lots of support from her parents. "I have an older brother and an older sister, but I always got the equal opportunity to help out and do whatever too, right? Sometimes you hear people that are like, 'oh, I want to have a son to take over the farm', but they were never like that. They were never pushing just for my brother to do it. It was always equal opportunity."

One of her first opportunities on the farm was chasing the cows in - then she graduated to scraping manure, or "nutrient removal," as the family euphemistically calls it. "When you call it 'removing nutrients,' it doesn't sound like 'poop,'" Lieven pointed out.

Evy eventually went off to the University of Guelph, where she had a chance to check out what other farmers out there were doing. "I did lots of out-of-the-classroom type stuff," she said. "We would go to different farms, and we would evaluate them, and present about them." After graduation, she came home with a few ideas she wanted to try out. "I'm able to go around, and if I see something, I can bring it up," she pointed out. "[Lieven and Nele are] really, like, approachable for any type of thing that I think can change. I went to school for Animal Science, so there's stuff that I learned that I can bring back home. One of the ways that my dad has helped for an easy transition and everything is just by being able to listen. Like, maybe my dad's just not a stubborn old man yet," she posited. "I got the hair for it!" Lieven added.

Guelph is also where Evy gained a deeper knowledge of the technological side of the family business. "I learned how to use the programs we already have in place here, like DairyComp," she explained. "All the information from all the cows is on that computer, and when we have milk tests come in, they can get the somatic cell test and the fat and protein and all the contents of all the cows… I learned how to actually use what we have on the farm already. So now, I can kind of figure out reports and help the farm get better through that. We're pretty low-tech around here, honestly… I get texted when there's a cow in heat. That is probably our most useful technology - it's like a Fitbit for cows," she added.

The Verschaeves are still in the early stages of succession planning for their family's dairy farm, so they have plenty of time to hammer out all of the details. Lieven already has his eye on a spot on the couch where he plans to spend his retirement. "That will be my spot," he said, pointing. "It looks good." His couch-potato era is likely still years away, though. "As long as nothing happens in the next five years," Nele offered pragmatically, "but that's something you don't really want to think about." Evy agreed with her mother's sentiment. "You never really know what's going to happen tomorrow," she said with a laugh. "I guess growing up on the farm, living on the farm,

Continued on page 17



Positive attitudes are paramount to farm's success



Healthy, happy herd

Evy Verschaeve and her father Lieven share a quiet moment with some of their Holstein cows nearby and Ella, Evy's devoted German shepherd, close at her side. *(Scott Stephenson photo)*

Continued from page 11

I've learned how to work hard and how to appreciate what's going on. It's a nothing-comes-easy type thing." Lieven couldn't agree more. "It's hard work, seven days a week - I tell people 'it's a free world, so if you think it's easy, you can start tomorrow. I might give you some advice, even," he added.

Hard moments like losing animals to injury and old age is an inevitable part of being a dairy farmer, but Evy finds comfort in the knowledge that each animal's memory lives on through their descendants. "You've just got to hope you have other ones from her family in the herd, which you probably do, and then you just keep going," she explained. "Sometimes, if it rains, it pours a little bit. Sometimes you have a bad week - but it's just keeping your head up, staying persistent, looking at the positive things - I think that's what I've learned the most… put on a good song, just keep going. Go for a float down the Maitland, and that clears your head - you're mentally clear again," Evy suggested. "Maybe I'm just blessed, but I'm not too mentally demanded. I just keep going. And I know the next day's going to be better if I'm having a bad day. Just hope for a rainy day, so that I can take a rest once in a while. But I don't know - maybe I'm not managing myself well enough!" she declared.

Beyond the day-to-day difficulties faced on the farm, it is also growing more and more difficult for Canadian farmers to confidently make predictions for the future. A series of ominous comments from American president Donald Trump has thrust Canada's dairy supply management system into the spotlight several times of late, but the Verschaeves know that there's no point in letting such vagaries get them down. "Supply management has been good for us," Lieven pointed out. "What the future brings, with Trump - nobody seems to know, clearly, because tomorrow, he might think differently, you know? So whatever happens, happens, and we will deal with it when it comes."

Evy believes that dairy supply management has been a real boon to farmers with smaller operations. "Here, we have 134 producers, but not a lot of them are really huge ones," she pointed out. "Having supply management lets those people with their small herds live a good life, and be able to contribute locally, too. You need to have those small farms that are able to support the community while just living on their own 50 cows. If you go back, and you think of how the quota system and supply management got implemented in Canada - that's something that doesn't exist in the States. If you're online, you always see, like, 'save the family farm'. All those little American farmers - they're struggling so hard just to make a living off of what they love to do."

Lieven likes to count the little joys that come along with being a dairy farmer, like seeing a calf develop into a cow. "Rewarding is a lot of small things," he said. "When you go to the grocery stores, and you see the people in front of you buy milk products and whatnot. That makes you feel good."

"Being able to see healthy, happy animals is the most rewarding part of it," Evy added. "Then you have to have your days in the winter time when the wind is blowing snow sideways and you still have to go out there and do the same stuff and fight against everything, just to get your day done. That's the hardest part. But then, you wake up, the sun shines, everyone's happy, and that's the best you can get. It's beautiful," she said.

While she's always trying new things to improve the wellbeing of their cows, Evy also likes things just fine the way they are. "Everything has to change to grow, but I hope it doesn't change too much. I think what we have right now is pretty good. Always hope for more quota, and keep slow growth," she said.

If Lieven could go back and do just one thing differently? "I'd buy that one ticket that says - 'you won millions and millions of dollars' - and I'd watch people work. I'd be a lazy slacker," he joked. All laughter aside, if he had found that winning lottery ticket, Lieven likely would have just kept on farming - but with seriously upgraded equipment. "Money doesn't make happiness, but it does make things easier," he said. "We worked really hard, me and Nele, and we really enjoy farming. I've never thought about what we would do differently. It's a different way of living and whatnot, but we'll never complain about it. And it's awesome when your kid takes over!"

Evy knows enough to know that it takes more than just knowledge and boundless energy to be a dairy farmer - you also have to love it. "Sometimes, the odd farm shuts down because no one wants to take over it, but you can't just force someone to love it too. And you've got to love it. And I love being able to farm."

Business Directory

Dave Franken
CONCRETE FORMING
For All Your Concrete Needs!
COMMERCIAL RESIDENTIAL
• Foundations • Floor Finishing
• Circular Tanks • Sandwich Walls
FREE ESTIMATES
RR#3 Blyth ~ Fax 519-523-9604
519-523-9971

Mike Boven Carpentry
NEW CONSTRUCTION
AGRICULTURAL
RENOVATIONS
RESIDENTIAL
Call 519-524-0253

JKM
Plumbing Heating Cooling and Refrigeration
306-897-0156
Clinton, Ontario
jkmheatingandcoolinginc@gmail.com
Jon Merner

Lakeside
SHELVING & RACKING
Large instock selection of pallet racking, store shelving, display cases and more for Industrial, Residential, Farm & Retail
www.lakesideshelving.com
lakesidemarket@gmail.com
33842 Market Rd., North of Goderich, off Hwy. 21
519-524-1740

Roof Trusses & Open Web Floor Joists
Residential/Commercial/Agriculture
Contact Zach at Watson's Home Hardware
519-335-3551
zach@watsonshomehardware.com

Affordable
CAR AND TRUCK RENTALS
Large & Small Trucks
fridge carts - piano dollys- moving blankets
Complete Selection of Cars
Our rates qualify for insurance replacement
Passenger Vans
full size or mini
GODERICH TOYOTA
344 Huron Rd. GODERICH 519-524-9381 1-800-338-1134

Parsons USED FURNITURE
417 Parsons Court, Goderich
519-612-1387
Open 12-4 Monday - Friday; 10-4 Saturday
email: parsonsusedfurniture@gmail.com
facebook.com/parsonsusedfurniture

Stryker's HEATING SERVICES
TSSA Certified
519-440-9659
Full line of Heating services for Propane and Natural Gas

Check out our books on rural living
The Citizen
405 Queen St., Blyth
519-523-4792

Jake's Small Engine Repair
Lawnmowers
Chain Saws
Side by Sides
Snowmobiles
Snow Blowers
Golf Carts & more
Dealer for BRIGGS & STRATTON
Jacob Nonkes
Licensed Small Engine Technician
smallenginejake@gmail.com
83341 Currie Line, Blyth
519-955-4234
www.facebook.com/jakessmallengine

Call 519-523-4792 to book your spot today!