Family at the Core of Balzer Dairy

Rick Balzer knew from a very early age that he wanted to be a dairy farmer. Having spent his whole life on a farm, it was clear there was only one logical career path for him. "I've farmed my whole life," Rick said. "I even wrote an essay in 9th grade about how I was going to be a dairy farmer someday."

Rick and Cathy Balzer along with their son, Scott, are pictured with the award they received as the 2013 Steele County Farm Family of the Year.

Rick's parents, Lawrence and Arlene, bought the farm near Owatonna, MN, in 1949. After one year of vocational school in Austin, MN, Rick returned to the farm in 1979 to farm with his dad. Rick and his younger brother, Doug, started a partnership in 1984, purchasing their dad's cows and machinery. Then in 1992, Rick bought out his brother and started farming with his own family.

Today, Rick, Cathy (his wife of 38 years), and their son Scott, farm 500 acres of black loam soils on which they grow a mixture of corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and grass mixtures. Scott is the third generation to farm on Balzer Dairy. Scott joined the farm in 2009 after graduating from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls with a dairy science degree and working for one year on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. The Balzers also have three other sons, Ross, Reid, and Brandon, who help out when needed.

In addition to their 500 acres, the Balzers are kept busy maintaining a herd of 150 dry and milking Holsteins. Rick also feeds heifers, fixes equipment, and does fieldwork. Cathy feeds calves, is the bookkeeper, and beds the cows. Scott feeds cows and does the mechanical and field work. There's always plenty of work to go around. The Balzer family must be doing something right as they were recognized as the 2013 Steele County Farm Family of the Year. "It was an unexpected honor," said Rick. "It's nice to be recognized for your hard work and something you love doing."

A typical rotation on the Balzer farm is five to seven years of corn, one year of soybeans, one year of oats, and two years of alfalfa. "We rotate out of alfalfa after two years no matter how good or bad the stand is because it's so good for the corn the following year," said Balzer. For his hay stands, Rick generally uses a mixture of 15 lbs alfalfa, 2 lbs clover, and 5 lbs of premium blend from Byron Seed. "We'll take four cuttings a year with the last one around early October since we need the extra feed." They cut their hay with a 1432 New Holland mower conditioner with an extra deflector which lays the hay over the entire length-of-cut for quick drying. Hay is cut in the morning, merged a few hours later, and then chopped when it reaches about 58% moisture.

After milking in a tie stall barn for years, the Balzers were interested in transitioning to a robotic milking parlor. They visited a lot of farms and did a lot of research, ultimately deciding to go "all in." In August of 2015, they built a new freestall barn and purchased two Lely Astronaut A4 robotic milkers. Fittingly, they named the robots "Rick" and "Cathy" in an homage to themselves in recognition of the many years the two of them milked cows in their old 103 tie stall barn. The robotic milkers have made milking much more productive, much more efficient, and much easier. It is designed to minimize milking times, improve udder health, and reduce udder stress.

The cows have full access to the robotic milker and enter at their own free will. The incentive for entering the milker is the feed. Each cow has an ID tag that is scanned, telling the machine exactly how much feed to dispense. If a cow enters the milker too soon after it has been milked, it is gently rejected. Since the Balzers have transitioned from a tie stall barn to the robotic milkers they've seen roughly a 30% increase in milk production, going from 62 lbs/cow/day to 82 lbs/cow/day.

The data generated with the robotic milkers is valuable as well. They can see the number of lactations, days pregnant, milk production, milk speed, vaccinations, as well as certain health issues. All of the data can be sorted into handy reports.

The barn also utilizes a state-of-the-art ventilation system with polycarbonate siding and no curtains. The fans were installed at a discount after the Balzers agreed to be a research facility for the company. The air exchange in the building is approximately four times per hour in the winter and up to 60 times per hour in the summer depending on the temperature and humidity. "The end result is fresher air for the cows and cooler temperatures in the summer," said Rick.

The best part of farming, according to Rick, is it's a family activity. "This is definitely a family affair. I really enjoy that aspect of farming," he said. They are beginning to plan for the next generation. While Scott is there already, others might get the itch to return to the farm.

If there is one valuable lesson Rick would share with other farmers it would be the benefits of using fungicide on corn. "I tried it three years in a row and gained 3 tons/ac doing so. It's well worth the trouble."

The Balzers have been dedicated MFA members since it began in 2004. "The most valuable part of MFA membership is the new ideas I read about. Learning about what other farmers are doing or what research is being done is extremely valuable to our operation."