Fietzer Dairy Farm: Innovation is Key to Maximizing Efficiency

If you ask Craig Fietzer how long he's been farming, he'll tell you, "Since I was 3 years old." While it may seem like he started farming that long ago, it wasn't until later that he began contributing in a meaningful way. "I had a love for farming right away, especially the agronomy side of it," said Fietzer. "I graduated in 1995 with two Associate degrees from Fox Valley Technical College, one in Agricultural Facilities & Equipment and one in Agribusiness & Science Technology. I then worked 2 years at Tomorrow Valley Cooperative in the Agronomy department. But deep down, I still had the desire to run my own farm." According to Fietzer, his time at the cooperative gave him the opportunity to gain valuable experience with a variety of different farming practices. "Then when I bought my own farm, I applied the things I had learned to become more efficient and save money in the process."

Craig's family: Amber, Melissa, Brandon, Grant, Craig, Nathan. Kyle's family: Kyle, Brody, Cindy, Alex, Patrick, and Jasmine.

The Fietzer family's foray into farming started in 1949, when Ervin and Marcella Fietzer (grandparents of the current owners) began farming along County Road N east of Manawa, WI. Their sons, Darryl and Ronald, then purchased the farm in 1979 and persevered through some lean years until the next generation of Fietzers, Kyle (Darryl's son) and Craig (Ronald's son), purchased the farm in 1997. By the third generation, what began as a six-cow enterprise had morphed into a 420-cow operation utilizing state-of-the-art robotic milking. Craig is primarily responsible for decisions relating to crops and farm machinery, while Kyle oversees the cows and milking side of the operation. All major farm decisions, however, tend to be made together.


Generational picture: Kyle, Darryl, Ardys, Bev, Ron, Craig.

The Fietzer Dairy Farm has long been known in the area as one which embraces new technologies and innovation. "We've had a lot of transition over the years," noted Craig. "In 1968, our farm was one of the first to build a freestall barn and use a Swing 8 milking parlor. Then, after a devastating fire in 1983 where all milking cows were lost and only 30 dry cows were saved, a double 9 herringbone Germania Model B parlor was built. In April 2016, we became one of the first farms in our area to use robots to milk our cows. We milk with 6 Lely A4 robots and have a 6-row, sand-bedded, naturally ventilated freestall barn." While the barn features six robots, it can be expanded to include two additional units. Individual units are able to milk 60-65 cows/day and can collect up to 7,000 lbs milk/day. The system milks each cow between two and five times per day. More importantly, however, it saves on labor costs and provides each cow with a personalized milking and feeding experience in order to maximize milk production and minimize feed costs.

"The adoption of robotic milking has been a game-changer," according to Craig. "The robots allow us to better manage labor costs and improve milk production. It also gives us more flexibility in managing our time and resources in an optimum way."

To feed their herd and maintain the 92-lb/cow/day average (3.75% fat, 2.9% protein), the Fietzers grow a wide array of forages on their 675-acre farm (424 acres owned, the rest rented). They grow ~220 acres alfalfa, 320 acres corn silage, 80 acres high-moisture shelled corn, and 55 acres winter wheat or soybeans. They also double-crop winter rye for cover crop and forage.

When it comes to alfalfa, the Fietzers generally maintain a 4-year rotation, a seeding year followed by three years of production. For new seedings, both spring and fall plantings are utilized – with low fields planted in the fall

and high fields planted in the spring. Spring plantings are usually no-tilled into winter rye, while fall plantings are seeded after winter wheat harvest. They use coated seed to help with establishment, generally plant at 18 lbs/ac, and use dairy manure to fertilize. Four to five cuttings are the norm. "I try to cut by September 10 each year to make sure I have enough regrowth going into winter," said Craig. Crown and stem counts in the spring are the main determinants of taking a stand out of production.

All hay is used for their own purposes on-farm and is harvested as haylage and ensiled. They use a 4995 John Deere discbine to cut, an H&S 12' merger to merge 3 rows together, a Gehl 1285 pull-type chopper to harvest, and four H&S 7+4 feeder boxes to haul. They produce 750-1,100 DM tons/year and average 4 DM tons/ac overall.

What's the best management advice Craig has for fellow farmers? "Be sure to keep track of removed tonnage annually and fertilize accordingly. Also, remember to add boron for alfalfa. It's an often-overlooked element of fertilization regimes."

When it comes to storing haylage, Craig still relies on traditional silos. "I am a little unique in that I still prefer upright silos to piles or bags," he said. "We still use two 24x96' poured cement silos and four Harvestores (a 25x110', a 20x90', two 20x85' silos). I like the Harvestores the best because of the ease of filling and being able to seal them off for extended periods of time." A less functional reason Craig prefers silos? "I have to admit, the view of the surrounding area is amazing from the top of a 110' silo."

Craig is a board member of the Midwest Forage Association and has been an MFA member since 2005. He appreciates the exposure it gives forage and dairy farmers, as well as the value it brings to his operation. "I like the fact that MFA gives farmers a voice in how governmental programs in agriculture should look and how they can be enhanced for our benefit. I also value the opportunity to network at educational events such as the Symposium and utilize and implement the information learned there on my own farm."