



FARMER'S MARKETING

How one Kentucky farm family is developing their farming operation and direct marketing ventures

BY KARA KEETON

Farming was in Patrick Kennedy's blood from the day he was born on his family farm in Jefferson County. Farming with his father on his family's operation in his teens and early 20s, Patrick learned to love the daily challenges of farm life.

In 1987 when his father passed away, the Kennedy family farm was the last working dairy farm in the Louisville city limits; when it was sold Patrick chose to stay close to his roots. He soon found a small beef and tobacco farm in Taylorsville and decided it was time to start his own operation; thus, Stone Cross Farm was born.

Down the highway in Shelbyville, working at her grandfathers John Deere dealership, Leeta Gray never imaged she would become a full time farmer. In fact,

marrying a farmer wasn't even in her plans, until she met Patrick.

Patrick and Leeta were married in 1992, and over the years they have turned Stone Cross Farm into more than just a farm; it has slowly become their career.

"When I first bought the farm, before Leeta and I married, it was a tobacco and beef cattle farm," said Patrick. "We decided several years ago to transition from that old-time farming production – commodity production – to a direct farm market-based operation."

Going direct

Making the leap to direct marketing didn't happen overnight for the Kennedy's; it was a slow process that began with chickens.

The Kennedys' operations are run from their small farm in Taylorsville, Ky.

"I wanted to get back into chicken production, we had always had chickens on the farm growing up, and I loved the fresh eggs," explained Patrick. "We realized quickly though that we had more eggs than we needed and so we started selling at the Bardstown Road Farmers' Market in the Highlands."

After the egg market began to grow, the Kennedy's began to look at other items for the market. When prices at the stockyards began to drop, the Kennedy's decided to begin processing a few cattle to sell at the market. The customer base for the beef began to grow, so they added a few pork products to the mix.

"It was a challenge at first selling the eggs and meat at the market, because at that time people weren't accustomed to the idea of buying those products fresh," explained Patrick. "As the markets have grown and become more European, the customers are expecting to see a full range of products at the market from heirloom vegetables to a variety of proteins."

Leeta decided early in their market experience that a blank table with a sign for eggs and meat, which had to be kept in a cooler, was not bringing new customers to their table. That is when she began making herbal soap to sell at the market. The herbal soaps were a unique and fragrant product that brought people

to the table and allowed Patrick and Leeta to talk about their protein products that couldn't be displayed like produce.

After focusing on the farmers' markets for several years, the breakthrough in the direct marketing world for the Kennedy's came from working with a fellow farmer, Leo Keene of Blue Moon Farm. Keene was selling at the Lexington Farmers' Market, but also provided products to several restaurants in the Lexington area. When chefs began asking for specific products, Leo would recommend the Stone Cross Farm products.

The restaurants in the Lexington area have become Stone Cross Farm's major customers. The Kennedy's have discovered the chefs love working with local foods and they especially like getting specific cuts of meat.

"Leo has become our sales agent in the Lexington/Frankfort area, not only to restaurants, but retail outlets as well. They also sell our products at their booth in the Lexington Farmers' Market," said Patrick. "It is a great relationship and has really

Stone Cross Farm's Cloverdale Creamery makes variations on Cotswold, Double Gloucester and Wensleydale cheeses.

helped us get to where we are today."

Today, retail and restaurants are the Kennedy's main markets. Stone Cross Farm has built a name for itself in Kentucky's retail and restaurant circles as a premier producer of beef and pork products and flavorful free range eggs. It is this success that led the Kennedy's to make the difficult decision to pull out of the local farmers' markets.

"We've been at the farmers' market for a number of years, but we are ready to move on to a different phase in our operation," said Leeta. "We are going to work with other farmers to make our products avail-



able at the market to our loyal customer base, but it is time we focus our full attention on the daily management of our production, especially with our new creamery."

For the love of cheese

Three years ago, Patrick decided he wanted to get back to his roots and incorporate dairy cattle into the farming oper-

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ation. Soon a small herd of jersey cattle and a few Holsteins were added to their diversified operation and Stone Cross Farm's Cloverdale Creamery was born.

Patrick and Leeta knew they did not want to have a commercial fluid dairy operation, so they began researching what they could do in the value-added dairy market that would only require a small dairy herd. They soon discovered the art and joy of aged, raw milk cheeses.

"We knew Kenny Mattingly of Kenny's Cheese from the farmers' market, so we asked to come down to talk and we actually helped him make cheese one day," said Patrick. "After the visit I thought it would be a daunting challenge to start our own creamery, but we decided to give it a try."

Unlike others who transition to a value-added dairy operation, the Kennedy's didn't even have the basic infrastructure for a dairy operation. Patrick began by working with contractors and designed a building that would house the milking parlor, office, and creamery all-in-one. Patrick did much of the work himself on the construction, while he and Leeta worked closely with the Kentucky Food Safety Branch on all facility requirements.

"When we began we thought we would have a little barn and then carry the milk over to a certified kitchen," said Leeta laughing. "After our first meeting with the state, we realized what we were thinking of as a creamery and what they were thinking of as a creamery was night and day apart."

Leeta went on to explain that they decided if they were going to invest in a creamery they were going to do it right, so they built the facility from the ground up including an underground cheese cave.

While working on the facility, the Kennedy's also began researching the types of cheeses they would want to make, and with a Jersey herd producing milk rich in butter fat, they decided to go with the traditional English style cheeses for this operation. Using their own name and recipes, they are making variations on Cotswold, Double Gloucester and Wensleydale cheeses. In fall 2007 they made their first test batches, which were very well received by the chefs who used their meat products.

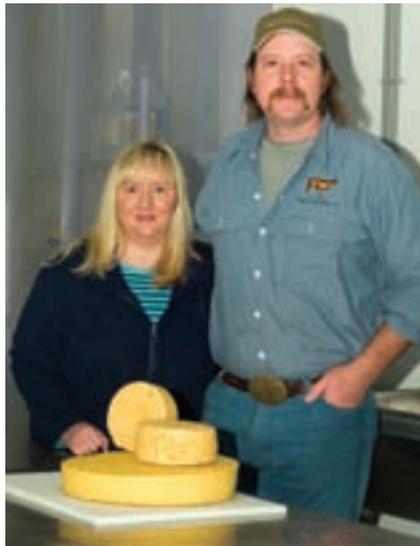
"We gave it away and asked for their opinion and everyone came back saying they would buy it that day," said Patrick.

"We thought we might be on to something, so now we are moving forward with the English style cheeses."

The Business Challenge

While developing Cloverdale Creamery, the Kennedy's began to see the other product lines grow. They realized that their business was growing to a new level. Knowing the challenges they were facing with the creamery, the entrepreneurs decided it was time to get business development assistance from the experts.

"We knew we needed an outside perspective on the business, but we wanted to work with someone who understands our unique business," explained Patrick.



Leeta and Patrick Kennedy made their first test batches in fall 2007.

"We did a little research and found KCARD, and after reviewing their website and seeing the companies they had worked with and their areas of specialty we decided to contact them."

Knowing they would need more capitol for the creamery and to expand the other product lines, the Kennedy's were interested in getting help from KCARD to develop a strategic business plan. The Kennedy's admit they have been surprised with the dedication and involvement KCARD has given to their company.

"I anticipated they would do what they said and come out for three or four visits," said Leeta. "They have been willing to meet much more than that to help

us through the process and they have given us more than just help on the business plan. They are also working with us to look at a feasibility study."

Just a Family Farm

Even though Stone Cross Farm has become the Kennedy's brand for their farm fresh products, it is still just a family farming operation. The Kennedy's have chosen to keep the operation at a scale where they can be involved at every level of the process. They have also chosen to keep their operation diversified.

"I don't want to go back to one thing, to be dependent on only one commodity for a living, I want our farm to be diversified," said Patrick. "We want to keep all our product lines going the best we can, with the goal of meeting the market demands of the people in this region and if it grows beyond that we will take it."

To meet the market demand for their farm fresh meats, they have chosen to work with neighboring farmers to increase production, instead of expanding and stressing their family operation.

"That is one goal Patrick has had all along, to help others, so for our protein we work with likeminded farmers who are focused on producing all natural products," explained Leeta. "This has allowed our business to grow and we have been able to provide a strong market for our neighbors."

The Kennedy's understand that the key to their success is keeping their customers happy, be it a chef that purchases a beef loin or the consumer buying sausage at the store.

"We keep the consumer in mind from the animal to the final product," said Patrick. "The Stone Cross Farm story is great to tell and people seem to want to make that connection to the farmer, but in the end you have to have a quality product or they won't come back."

"It is really exciting to finally see this part of our dream become a reality," said Leeta. "We hope that all our customers try our unique English style cheeses and enjoy them as much as we have enjoyed making them!" 🍷

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