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A-milking we shall go

A FARM VISIT IN NEW ZEALAND GETS US UDDER-LY TRANSFIXED

→ PAGES 2&3

LIVING PAGES 4&5

STORIES FOR OUR CHILDREN

GREEN PAGES 8&9

MARINE ENTREPRENEURS

BEATS PAGE 12

WINGS TO SOAR IN SABAH

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A FARM AND MILK STORY

A visit to Bella Vista farm offers interesting insights into what it takes to run a working dairy farm in New Zealand, writes **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**

OUR eyes lock across space and time, the only thing separating us from each other a weathered wooden fence. The sun, which had hitherto cast a golden glow to the land, has suddenly gone into hiding. The landscape of Bella Vista Farm is now awashed in dramatic grey.

Barely registering the sudden caress of a light drizzle on my already-chilled face, I remain transfixed, unable to tear my eyes away from the unblinking-stare of a handsome Holstein-Fresian cow holding court among a sea of others in a standard uniform of black and white.

But then, with a disdainful twitch of its tag-pegged ear, the magic is broken and I'm rewarded with a view of its departing backside as it ambles away to rejoin the rest of the herd. Well, that was painful.

It's a blustery autumn afternoon on the day of our media visit to Bella Vista farm, one of Fonterra's longest-standing farm, having been with the global dairy giant from New Zealand since 1971. Located in the small rural town of Karaka, Auckland, the 150-hectare dairy farm with its 450 Holstein-Friesian cows is owned by the Shaw brothers, Murray, 65 and Graham, 63.

MILK MATTERS

"These babies have been hand-reared," says elder brother Murray, his voice jolting me out of my reverie as he creeps up behind me.

Pointing to a cluster of inquisitive-looking calves, he explains that their mothers would have given them up 12 hours after they're born.

"Then we take over. See those tags in their ears? It's to help us identify who their mum and dad is, or their family line."

His languid Kiwi-accented voice becomes alive as he shares that there are many benefits to getting the calves off their mothers as early as they do.

"One, you're protecting them from the elements. Sometimes the cows give birth during very cold windy conditions and they end up exposing their babies to the elements. Or you can get a calf born to a first-time mother. She wouldn't have a clue what to do and ends up not feeding her calf well. By taking the calf away to safety, we can guarantee its welfare and growth rate."

Squinting at the fertile land beyond the wooden gates, I ask Murray where the lucky fathers are. My question is met with a hearty chuckle and then the reply: "They're in a straw!"

Sensing my bewilderment, Murray kindly explains: "It's all artificial breeding. We do it ourselves. We buy semen out of a catalogue and it gets delivered in a straw just like a drinking straw but way smaller. When the cows are on heat, we, erm, put the semen in and hopefully, there's a 65 per cent chance that it'd get pregnant through that insemination."

Playle is proud of the quality of NZ milk.

It's not just a random selection, Murray is swift to add. They'd leaf through the catalogue and check through several criteria before opting for the ideal 'baby-making' candidate.

"The ultimate factor would be the milk production, and of course, you'd want a nice-looking cow too! The condition of their legs and feet is also important as in New Zealand, cows have to walk quite long distances," shares Murray.

Elaborating, he continues: "Lameness is a big thing here. The cows can step on stones as they're walking. And in winter, with prolong immersion in water, their hooves can become softer. So if they stand on a stone, it can become painful. In such cases, we'll segragate the cows and put them into what's called a nurse paddock so they don't have to do so much walking."

Leaving the fertile vista behind us, Murray leads me inside a shed-like building where a rotating platform stands in the centre. It's a rotary milking parlour, where large number of cows are automatically-milked.

From the corner of my eye, I spy a small commotion advancing from the door across from us. Cows are being herded and routed into the milking parlour, and subsequently being fitted with teat cups onto their udders.

Transfixed once again at the scene before me, I am willing to just let Murray drone on with his explanation. "The cows actually like this process. They become quite relaxed and can even fall asleep as they're being milked. You can see when they're lining up, some of them actually push into each other trying to get onto the platform!" says Murray, chuckling.

After the milking process is completed, the cup will automatically release its pressure on the cow's udder. The animals then retreat before returning to the open pasture.

"Currently our cows, which are milked twice a day, are giving us about 27 litres of milk each a day," shares Murray. "The cows are milked around 5am and then later at around 2.30pm, with milking operations lasting an average of an hour and a half to two hours."

The Shaws have two separate herds, which are milked all year round. When one herd is 'drying off' (resting before next calving), another herd is brought in to be milked. There are a total of 40 paddocks on the farm, all of which have to be checked.

Poor milk production is an indication that a cow isn't in the best of health, says Murray. "If they're not eating, their milk production will drop. Every milking session, we measure the milk production. Generally if a cow is sick, she'll stop eating. It could be that the cow has mastitis, an infection in the udder by the bacterium Staphylococcus aureus leading to poo quality milk. But of course, all our cow are vaccinated."

STRINGENT CONTROL

As Murray excuses himself to attend to a worker, I'm joined by Terry Playle Fonterra's regional food safety manager who continues where Murray left off.

Eyes sparkling with pride, Playle says that if there's one thing that Fonterra — and indeed, New Zealand in general — can really shout about, it's their quality of milk.

"Our somatic cell count (the main indicator of milk quality) is very low In fact, our national average through out New Zealand for Fonterra is around 170,000 somatic cell count, which by international standard is very low. If the count is high, it indicates high level o bacteria."

This success Playle credits to the programmes which Fonterra has in place for its farmers. The company works with 10,500 farmer shareholders who supply the Co-Op with milk that are then turned into a huge range of dairy ingredients and branded consumer goods.

Citing an example, Playle offers: "There are programmes set up with vets and other service providers to ensure that everything is taken care of, from animal ailments to machines."

Anything less than best quality milk adds Playle, there are financial deductions made to the farmers.

"We may have deducted money of them as a company but if they get in a professional vet or professional service to try and fix the problem, they can claim that money back to fund that extra work."

Quality tests are conducted on every collection. It's a very stringent process and an evolving one, says Playle.

"For example, we have strict controls in milk filtration. After the milk is

collected, it's passed through a piping system and filtered. The milk must be filtered to a specific temperature. Coming from the cow to the machine, the milk might be 33 degrees. Quality-wise, the quality will deteriorate very quickly at that temperature. We need to get it chilled down via a plate heat exchanger to below 7 degrees as soon as possible."

The milk is then kept in a storage tank at the farm, where later it's transferred to the Fonterra tankers and sent to the processing plants. Milk samples are taken and sent to the Milk Test NZ laboratory for further testing.

FARM BOY

His steps jaunty, Murray rejoins me and we make our way out of the shed, and into the fresh air. The sun has miraculously emerged, bathing the land in an ethereal golden glow.

Murray shares his family story as we enjoy the crisp autum air. "I was born on a dairy farm. My father's side of the family came from Ireland and my mother's side from Scotland and they settled just out of Auckland in 1860."

His childhood, recalls this father-of-three, was spent riding horses and running around the family farm.

"I was 8 or 10 when I first milked a cow. It was a walk-through cow shed and we'd milk only eight cows at a time. Dad had two farms, which both milked about 100 cows. In the 50s and 60s, to have 100 cows was the norm in New Zealand. Dad used to milk 100 cows on his own. We kids helped him. On his other farm he employed a husband and wife to do the milking."

Suffice to say, much has changed since then in the country's dairy industry, thanks to technology.

"It'd not have been possible to milk 400 cows in an hour and a half back then. It'd have been a labourious walk-through cow shed where you'd milk 10 cows at a time and you'd have been in the shed for hours on end."

Suddenly looking pensive, Murray confides: "I'm the third and last generation. I have three boys, my brother has three boys, and none of them are interested in the business."

So what will happen? The sparkle in his kindly eyes dims and with a shrug of the shoulder, Murray replies: "Most likely the business will be sold. You must appreciate that this is a seven-day, 24-hour job, for 365 days. If we have a cow calving at night, you need to get out of bed and attend to it. How many of today's people would be happy to do that? To be on a farm, you need to be married to the farm. As I am."

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Cows at the milking parlour.

Milk has to be chilled else it will deteriorate.

Cows are tagged for easy identification

Murray says he is married to the farm.

PICTURES BY KAREN HO AND INTAN MAIZURA AHMAD KAMAL. FRONT COVER PICTURE COURTESY OF FONTERRA