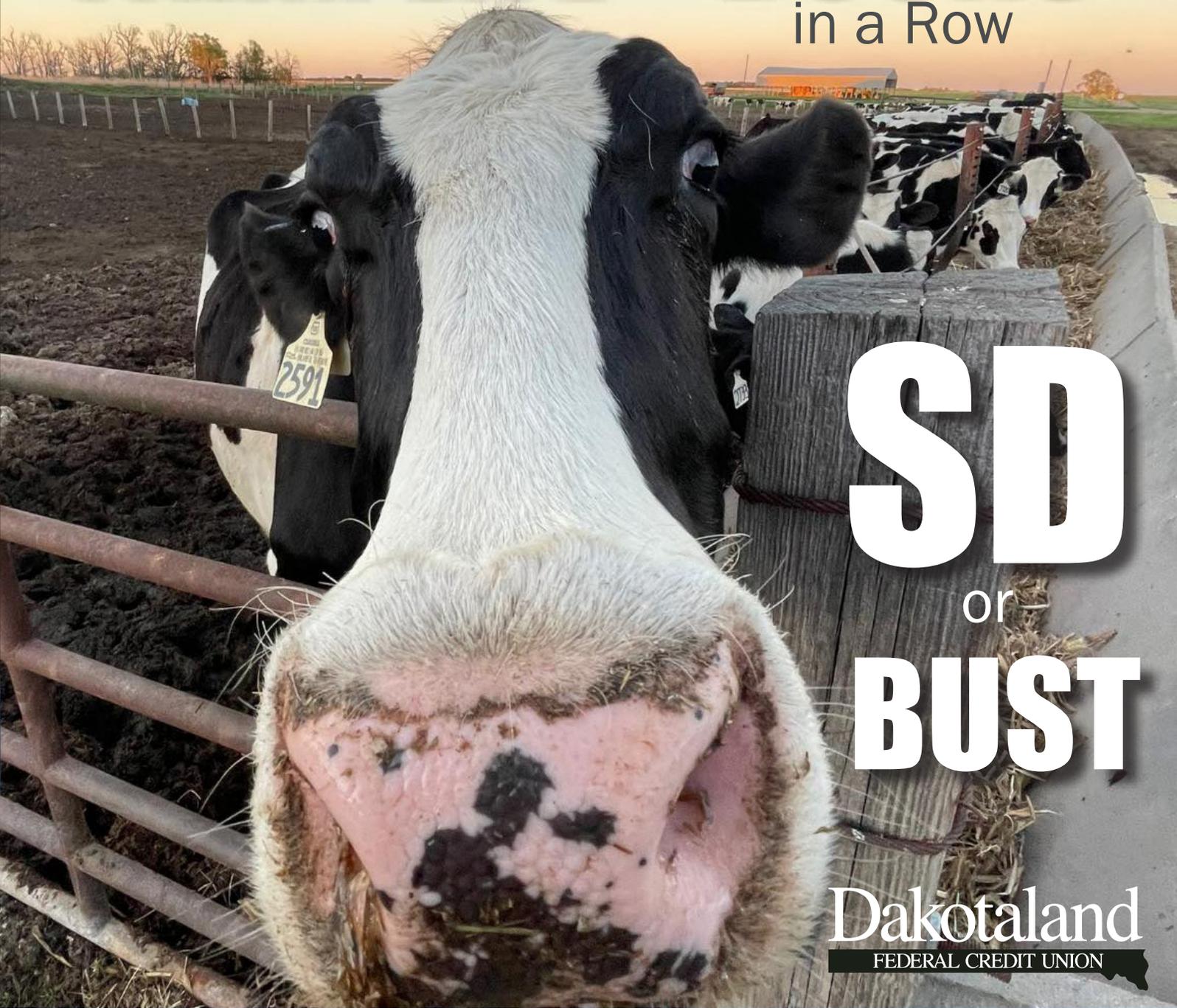


INDEPENDENCE

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Livin' the FARM LIFE

By Dawn Mutchelknaus
VP of Marketing | Dakotaland Federal Credit Union



A Great Pyrenees dog by the name of Sky, happily greets you at the entrance to Farm Life Creamery as she patrols the grounds keeping watch over the random collection of fur and feathers that make up the barnyard petting zoo. Bunnies, donkeys, horses, goats, baby calves, cats, geese, ducks, chickens, turkeys, emus, a llama and guinea pigs are a sampling of what you'll see on this rural property located just southwest of Ethan, South Dakota. Upon further investigation you will find an 18-hole mini golf course and the (self-proclaimed) largest tire swing in South Dakota, along with a jungle gym of fun formations to keep kids entertained for hours. In the center of it all is a large grain bin converted to a beverage/concession stand. The backdrop to this agricultural fun show is, as you would expect, a collection of livestock barns original to the homestead, framed by a clear blue South Dakota skyline.

Why, you ask, would someone go to such extremes to create this fun farm experience? The answer lies with a third-generation dairy farmer and a born-for-adventure Wisconsin gal who crossed paths in late 2016. Chad Blase and Laura Klock are the owners/operators of Farm Life Creamery, which has been a labor of love for the family business, but also one of survival.

Chad was raised deep in the dairy business, but had ventured off the farm and joined Muth Electric spending several years in the construction world. In 2017 Blase returned to the dairy barn. "The electrical business was a great career and I loved working for the Muth family, but it had come to a point where my family needed me at home," shared Chad. Shortly thereafter, the milk prices plummeted causing the Blase Family to make some major changes. Being one of less than 100 dairy farms left in South Dakota, survival was the number one priority, which led to downsizing their once 450 head dairy herd to now 130 cows.

It was a difficult decision as Chad's dad, Gary, had built a proven Grade A Holstein dairy herd from the ground up. The cows are far more than 'just livestock' to the Blase Family. Matter of fact, they had owned a cow that produced over six semi loads of milk in her lifetime. "Vortex" was buried on the farm when she passed away and her picture, along with legendary

others, proudly hangs on the wall of the creamery.

This economic downturn in the dairy business also meant getting creative with alternative ways to generate income from the farm. It was Chad's mother, Amy, who suggested opening a creamery in an effort to turn their high-quality milk into a profitable consumer product versus selling it raw at a loss. This is where Laura began to shine. A self-proclaimed "serial entrepreneur" with an education in marketing and a desire to help save the Blase's family farm, Laura began to research, seeking out anyone who might have some experience or advice to share on the topic. Her quest led her to Valley Side Farm Cheese in Crooks, SD, which had equipment and inventory for sale, but also knowledgeable staff willing to teach Chad and Laura the ways of making cheese.

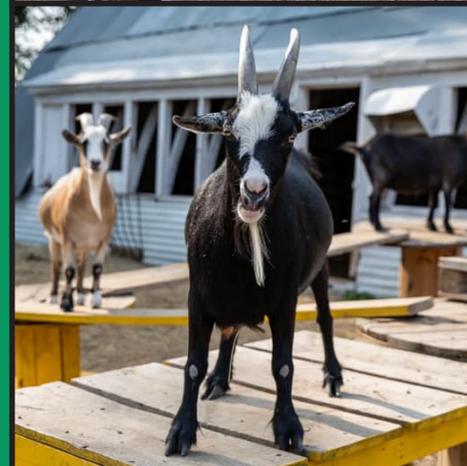
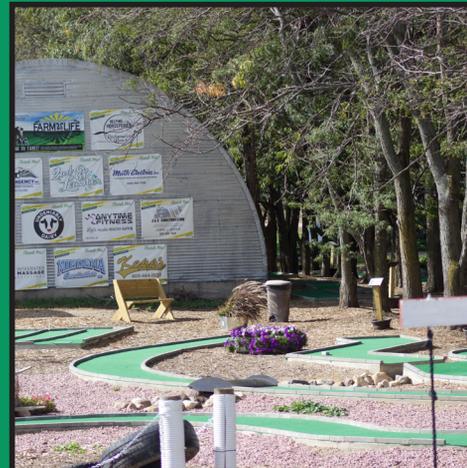
Laura recalls getting up at 2AM to haul fresh milk to Crooks in exchange for their lesson in making that day's cheese. "It was exhausting, but we are thankful to have started out small and learned the business from the right people," she declared. With the equipment they needed and an education in cheese, Chad and Laura were ready to build their own facility, which would eventually house Farm Life Creamery. The duo chose an existing barn on the property with a 100-year-old history and began renovations. Chad admits it was a challenge bringing the structure to code and a treasure hunt to find everything they needed to be fully operational.



In October 2019, the first batch of cheese was produced at Farm Life Creamery. Their block cheese production was well underway, but due to the time needed for aging, it was not ready for market. In the meantime, Laura discovered a hole in the cheese curd market, so they decided to set their focus on flavored curds, which took off with great success. "It was exciting to see our products gaining a following and local businesses like, County Fair of Mitchell, being so supportive of our startup efforts," shared Laura. After experiencing their busiest week to date, COVID entered the scene. "Cheese tastings were critical to building our business and suddenly it all came to a halt. It was disappointing to say the least," she said.

With this unexpected downtime, the duo accelerated the next part of their plan. Laura found South Dakota had only one operating bottling company, which is owned by Land O' Lakes. The Blase operation may be small in comparison to Land O' Lakes, but the family dairy is fast. Chad is able to bring milk from cow to bottle in as little as 3 hours. In March of 2021 Farm Life Creamery launched freshly bottled white and chocolate milk to their lines of distribution, and are officially the only small licensed Grade A bottling facility in the state. Also, during

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this time, the curd side of the business expanded their selection to 45 different flavors. In addition, they joined forces with SDSU in Brookings making ice cream available at the creamery.

As good as they are, the product line is a bonus to those who visit Farm Life Creamery. The establishment offers a true family farm experience, which has been explored by many. Laura has booked tours and events for 4-H groups, school field trips, senior citizen bus tours, FFA teams, culinary schools, developmentally disabled outings, as well as company retreats and picnics. “We did this for our family, but now we want to share it with yours,” explained Laura.

On July 31st, 2021, Chad and Laura hosted their grand opening, but there is no time to rest. This dynamic team is busy creating holiday cheese baskets for the Christmas season and are looking into producing yogurt, which will make them the only South Dakota creamery to do so. As much of a challenge as it has been, Chad and Laura both agree it is a lesson in perseverance along with a lot of trial and error. The reward is knowing they have found a way to keep their home where the herd is.



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