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Dairy Farmers Are Closing Up Shop. A Rite of Summer That Celebrates Them Lives On.

Thousands of people in Wisconsin visit farms each June for a tradition known as the dairy breakfast. In one county where the industry struggles, two families kept the breakfast going.

By **Julie Bosman** Photographs by Alyssa Schukar

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BANGOR, Wis. — It was just shy of 5 a.m. on Saturday, and a determined crew of volunteers fanned out across the farm on Creamery Creek. Men mixed pancake batter in buckets. Daisies were arranged in vases on long tables. The smell of Folgers wafted through the tents.

Soon, a rural traffic jam materialized like something out of “Field of Dreams,” a long line of cars snaking through the countryside to reach the farm.

They came for the county dairy breakfast, which, like many Wisconsin traditions, is fiercely cherished within the state and mostly unknown outside of it. The annual early-summer gatherings are held across the state, with thousands of people showing up at a farm at dawn to socialize over a spectacularly lactose-rich spread of milk, yogurt, cheese curds, scrambled eggs, pancakes and sausage. For dessert, there is ice cream or frozen custard, often topped with local strawberries.

In rural Wisconsin, the dairy breakfast is as indispensable as a Fourth of July parade, an annual tradition that celebrates a common bond and gathers neighbors together.

This one almost didn't happen.

Last year was a brutal one for dairy farmers in Wisconsin, as the price of milk slumped, cutting into profits. Many farmers simply gave up. Five years ago, there were 96 dairy herds in La Crosse County, where Creamery Creek Holsteins, the farm named for the stream that runs through it, sprawls across 2,200 acres. Now, there are 60.

When the committee that plans the annual La Crosse County dairy breakfast met this spring, the members came to a crushing realization: No farmer had stepped forward to host and, with time running out, the breakfast would have to be called off.

“The dairy industry in Wisconsin is struggling to keep afloat, and our farmers in La Crosse County are not immune to this,” the committee posted on its Facebook page. “We remain hopeful that things will turn around and our farmers will pull through.”

Megan Hansen, a 21-year-old dairy science major at the University of Wisconsin whose family is an owner of Creamery Creek, called it the “woe-is-the-dairy-industry message.”

“I texted my dad and said, ‘We have to do this,’” she said.

Mark Hansen, her father, immediately agreed. “I got a tear in my eye reading that text,” he remembered.

Phone calls were placed. Family meetings were convened. Back-of-the-envelope calculations were made. Louisa Peterson, whose family co-owns the farm, was also unwilling to let the dairy breakfast die. Creamery Creek, which

had hosted in 2018, would do it again, she announced.

More than 3,000 people were expected, and she had less than 12 weeks to prepare.



By the morning of the breakfast, the farm had been neatened. Antique tractors were on display. An old alfalfa field was now a parking lot.

When the color guard marched down a gravel road and fired a salute to begin the festivities, a line of cows in a nearby barn — tagged with numbers and names like Milkshake and Galapagos — startled and jumped to their feet. (Even cows know to stand at attention, a Marine in attendance said.)

“You have commanded us to work the land and cultivate it,” said the Rev. Raja Kennedy, a Roman Catholic priest, leading a prayer. “Your devoted people now pray that you will grant us an abundant harvest from our flocks, fields,

vineyards and orchards.”

“Amen,” the crowd murmured.



Creamery Creek Holsteins is the largest dairy in the county. Ms. Peterson and her husband, Justin, both 38, met as undergraduates at Michigan State University and moved to western Wisconsin in search of the farming life. In 2010, they partnered with the Hansen family, who had been farming their land since the 1930s.

The farming was different out here, Ms. Peterson quickly realized. The Driftless region of Wisconsin, which the glaciers missed during the ice age, is marked by river valleys and bluffs, so farms tend to have less room to spread out.

Creamery Creek is an exception, a relative behemoth with 675 cows and 11 full-time employees. All four Peterson children pitch in with chores around the farm.



Louisa Peterson, left, with her husband, Justin, and their children at the dairy breakfast.

On the day of the breakfast, Ms. Peterson, friendly and unflappable, was a jack-of-all-trades — decision maker, problem solver, farmer.

“If this is the only farm people ever visit, if this is the only farmer they ever meet, what do I want them to see?” she said. “That’s why I do the breakfast.”





At 7 a.m., a three-person band began playing “Stand by Me.” (They would have come earlier, Ms. Peterson said, but they had to milk their own cows.)

The breakfast tends to have different meanings for people, depending on where they stand on the generational ladder. Those who have been coming for decades often grew up on a farm and like the excuse to come back to one.

For younger families who live in the college town of La Crosse, the breakfast is more of an agri-tourism activity, an opportunity to show their small children how a cow is milked and where food comes from.



Dale Kirchner, 84, grew up on a farm in Mindoro and worked for the local agricultural co-op for 52 years. When he was a boy, there were 34 dairy farms in the valley where his parents farmed, he said. Now there is one.

It used to be that nearly everybody worked in the same business, said his wife, Betty. Hollywood has film. Washington has politics. And this part of Wisconsin had dairy.

“There are so many scary changes, but you just have to accept them,” she said, checking on a vat of coffee. “You can’t be bitter. It’s just progress.”



Betty Kirchner

Dale Kirchner

Then there is the rising generation on the farm, full of ambition and ideas.

Megan Hansen is studying agriculture, and like many young would-be farmers, she plans to get an advanced degree.

“A lot of people tell me, ‘You shouldn’t go into this,’” she said. “But I want to do something to help the industry.”

She was an ambassador of sorts for the business on Saturday, watching the birth of a heifer calf that attracted a crowd of onlookers and feeding a 3-day-old calf a mixture of electrolytes and water.



Megan Hansen.

A crowd gather

“It’s like Gatorade for cows,” she said.

Jeff Heitkamp, chairman of the dairy breakfast committee, was running on about 30 minutes’ sleep on the day of the event, after being consumed for weeks by the planning process. He keeps doing the work for its own rewards, even though he was recently laid off from his job as a salesman in the agriculture business.



Jeff Heitkamp and Ms. Peterson.

Mr. Heitkamp grew up on a farm in East Dubuque, Ill., and has never worked in another field. He is considering two job leads right now — one of them in a different business.

“I don’t know if I’ll still be in the dairy industry down the road,” he said. “So many farms are selling out. I’d like to stay. But it’s getting harder and harder.”

As the lines dwindled and guests left the farm, Ms. Peterson, finally able to relax, took her first bite of food all day — a spoonful of frozen custard. She has already volunteered to host another dairy breakfast, but for a notably far-off and specific year, 2032, when the farm would celebrate its 100th birthday.

Most of her children will be grown by then. The oldest, Joseph, who is 12, has “an incredible sense of duty,” she said, doing chores without complaint.

He says that he wants to be a priest, another job that is sorely needed in La Crosse County, where their pastor shuttles between parishes.

Ms. Peterson is supportive of whatever her children someday decide to do, she said, especially if one of them goes into the dairy industry.

“It’s every farmer’s dream,” she said.



Donna Hansen, right, thanked Ms. Peterson for hosting.

Julie Bosman is a national correspondent who covers the Midwest. Born and raised in Wisconsin and based in Chicago, she has written about politics, education, law enforcement and literature. [@juliebosman](#) • Facebook

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