

---

# Fresh Milk and More from a Family Cow (or Two)

Karma Glos  
Kingbird Farm

I always know my husband is out doing chores when the milk buckets are gone from their hooks. These stainless-steel behemoths are essential for bringing in the milk from our cows. The smaller one is for direct milking and the larger one for storing the milk, saving it from a kick or misplaced step. These buckets arrive back in my kitchen twice daily, the big one brimming with warm, frothy milk ready for straining. With these kind bovine offerings I prepare cheese, yogurt, ice cream, and, of course, the “the gold of summer” — butter.

We milk two Jersey cows. One is an elderly Jersey/Shorthorn cross we traded for chicken feed many years ago. She is an ornery, cantakerous beast who is completely Daddy’s girl. She eventually warms up to most of the interns who milk her, but really she’s my husband’s cow. She moos low and sweet when he appears. She comes running in for her milking, her giant old udder swaying under her hips. She gets a bit grouchier every year, but she is still raising calves and making good milk. We received our other cow in trade for some piglets, and she has turned out to be a lovely milk cow. She’s a shy, sweet creature who timidly cooperates with milking and then quickly returns to tending her calf.

My husband is a stoic and steady milker. He lovingly hand-milks the ladies twice daily, spending 15 to 20 minutes with each of them. He doesn’t view the milking romantically, nor begrudgingly, but practically. These beautiful beasts turn forage we view as inedible into nutrient-dense, mighty delicious foods. What they do is magic.



Allowing calves to remain with their mothers to nurse is all part of the plan at Kingbird Farm.



Jersey cow Clara grazes while keeping an eye on her sleeping calf.

---

## Managing Our Family Cows

Between the two cows, we usually haul in about three gallons per milking. Since we allow the calves to remain with their mothers and drink milk as desired, our daily take can be lower or higher depending on when the calves did their snacking.

Leaving the calves with their moms has worked for us because it eliminates the chore of bottle-feeding the calves and results in enormous calves, yet it still generates enough milk for our family needs. We do eventually wean, because at a few months of age the calves begin to drink all the milk, leaving us none. We accomplish fence-line weaning by removing the Jerseys and leaving the calves with our herd of Scottish Highland beef cows. Some of our Highlands will allow calves other than their own to nurse, so the Jersey babies get a suckle now and then. After weaning we continue milking our Jerseys through the fall and winter until the cows are about three months from freshening again. We like to give them a good break from being milked before the new calves arrive and we start the whole process over again.

Our aim is to have cows freshen in May. March and April are too cold for my taste. May is still early enough to finish the calves 18 months later, but the grass is starting to grow and the weather is better. The Jerseys usually calve outdoors, but we do have the option of bringing them into box stalls should the weather turn nasty or if the labor is difficult. We like to attend births to check on progress and also to see the miracle once again; it never ceases to amaze us.

We breed to a Red Angus bull, which typically produces a nice small calf, and our cows have had few problems calving. We have had the good fortune to be able to lease a young bull every breeding season. We prefer leasing a bull because this releases us from the extra work of feeding and managing the bull year-round. Breeding with a bull also ensures that our cows are most likely to get bred. Artificial insemination (AI) is also an option, and we used it exclusively before we had the Highlands and milked only one cow.

## Suggested Reading and Resources

Carroll, Ricki. *Making Cheese, Butter & Yogurt*. (Storey Country Wisdom Bulletin a-283). North Adams, MA: Storey, 2003.

Sheaffer, C. Edgar. *Homeopathy for the Herd*. Austin, TX: Acres USA, 2003.

Thomas, Heather Smith. *Getting Started with Beef & Dairy Cattle*. North Adams, MA: Storey, 2005.

van Loon, Dirk. *The Family Cow*. North Adams, MA: Storey, 1976.

New England Cheesemaking Supply Company,  
[www.cheesemaking.com](http://www.cheesemaking.com).

AI was relatively cheap, but it left heat detection up to us (the bull is much better at that) and usually took a few tries to get the cow bred. We have found it much easier to get cows bred if they have herd mates, especially with AI.

Most days my husband hand-milks the cows morning and evening and brings the milk in warm. With calves on the cows, hand-milking twice a day can be a bit unpredictable. If we catch the cows right after the calves have suckled, there may be very little milk. Several times a week there is plenty of milk, enough for drinking and a few gallons for making a batch of cheese too.

### Using a Cheese Press

Immediately after the milk arrives in the house, I strain the milk through an in-line, non-gauze milk filter. If there are at least two gallons, I make cheese with the fresh raw milk using a mesophilic (cool-temperature) starter. Direct-set, freeze-dried mesophilic starter has been most reliable in my kitchen. Since the milk is raw and my kitchen is not sterile, it was important to find a starter that would culture milk under these conditions. After culturing the milk for 20 minutes, I add half a tablet of vegetable-based rennet dissolved in a little cold water and let that sit until a firm curd forms. Approximately 15 minutes later I cut the curd into cubes and slowly warm them to 110°F, gently stirring often. Warming the curds takes 15 to 30 minutes. The curds are ready when they are firm enough to stick together and squeak when I chew them. I then drain off the whey and “cheddar” the curds with my hands. Cheddaring breaks the curd into small bits, squeezes out much of the remaining whey, and integrates the salt.

The curd is ready for pressing when it sticks together slightly when balled. After lining the cheese press with butter muslin, I press the curd into the press and add the follower (the lid of the press). My press has screw pressure, so I must pass by occasionally and crank down the follower a little more. I usually press the cheese for 12 hours, or until the press is needed for the next cheese.

Fully-pressed cheese is removed from the butter muslin, trimmed, and rubbed with salt. It is then dried on a bamboo sushi mat in the refrigerator until a hard rind forms. This usually takes several days, after which the cheese wheel is waxed, labeled, and stored back in the refrigerator. I cure my cheese at cold temperatures for several months. Cheese rounds opened after six months have a rich, sharp, cheddar flavor and a good firm texture.

### Butter By Food Processor

I typically prepare all my butter near the end of the season when the cows are on hay and the butterfat content of the milk is higher. The first step is to strain the milk into large pots, which are placed directly into the refrigerator to sit. Twelve hours later the risen cream is skimmed off the surface with a ladle and stored in glass jars. The skim milk is then either used for cooking or fed to the dogs, and the pot is cleaned for the next milking. After a few days of skimming milk, I put the cream into my food processor to turn it to butter. The whirring blades of the processor separate the butterfat from the buttermilk. Large globules of butter form within a few minutes. If the butter still oozes some buttermilk, I finish off the job with a wooden butter paddle. I use the paddle to smooth and press the butter until no more buttermilk runs from the pat of butter. The butter is stored in the freezer wrapped in wax paper. The leftover buttermilk, as well as whey, is useful for cooking and also relished by pets, chickens, or hogs.



Karma Glos watches as her daughter Rosie learns the art of milking a cow.

Although the management and milking of one or two dairy cows is a lot of work and responsibility, it also provides our family with a steady supply of very high quality raw milk products that would otherwise be difficult to find. Milking even one cow ties you down to reliably doing chores every 12 hours, although this can be flexible when the calf is left on the cow. No matter what management style you choose, it is important to fit your dairy cow into the flow of your daily routine so she does not become a burden. Milking a cow can bring joy and good food if done with love, creativity, and responsibility.