

Happy herd

Marshalls create unique organic, robotic dairy

BY JEFF POOLE
Editor

The 550 cows at Keith and Deanne Marshall's Unionville dairy farm would seem to live an enviable life. They eat when they want. They get milked when they want. They have high-energy organic grasses in their pastures and they rotate among those daily. They even have waterbed-like stalls in the milking parlor that further their comfort before their milking.

It's quite an operation. And it's definitely not a traditional dairy farm.

"We cater to their every need," Deanne Marshall says with genuine affection for their 550-member, mixed-breed herd. "They're very comfortable. They've got it made!"

That's not to mean the dairy business is easy, though. For the Marshalls' cows it may be, but the dairy didn't get here easily.

Marshall said her husband, his brother and her father-in-law purchased the farm more than 40 years ago, but only in the last few years have she and Keith reimagined and specifically re-engineered their dairy farm operation to more of what she called a "European" operation.

"I don't think there is anyone else in the United States with an operation like this," she said. "We're definitely the only organic, robotic dairy in this area."

Organic. Driving into the farm, any visitor is keenly alerted to that designation as signs mark the farm as a "bio-secure area," regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture. To qualify, the Marshalls' entire operation is inspected thoroughly and regularly. They use no penicillin, no antibiotics on their cattle, whose milk is sold and marketed under grocery giant Harris-Teeter's organic label.

Robotic. The dairy has nine, fascinatingly efficient robotic milking machines that do everything from cleaning the dairy cows' udders, to testing the milk for impurities and calculating production per milking quarter. A large red cow outside the dairy office is a symbol of the Lely company that makes the Marshalls' nine robotic milking machines that measure and perform just about everything imaginable as part of the operation. Collars around each cow's neck identify them to the

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Dairy cows at the Marshall farm in Unionville have a tremendous amount of freedom. They can eat when they want, milk when they feel like it and lounge on comfortable, water bed-like pads in the barn. When they're ready to be milked, they enter a stall that cleans their udders, and connects a robotic milker that records an array of data and tests the milk as it's being collected. Deanne Marshall visits with one of the calves in the calving barn. The farm collects more than 60,000 gallons of milk daily. For more photos, visit www.orangenews.com.

PHOTOS BY JEFF POOLE