

FRESH ON THE FARM

MSU alumna continues dairy farm, reignites family legacy

BY ERIN BUCKLEY

AT ONE TIME, dairy farming was prevalent throughout the South. In 1970, there were 648,000 farms throughout the U.S., but by 2006, the industry had declined to 75,000 farms, an 88% decrease, according to the USDA. A labor-intensive industry, the decline has been driven by cost and demand. Despite the hardships local dairy farmers have faced, **Jessica Junkin Vails**, MSU College of Agriculture and Life Sciences alumna, and her family decided to defy the odds and open Circle J Dairy in Gordo, Alabama.

Vails graduated from MSU in 2019 with a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Education, Leadership and Communication. She grew up on a farm raising beef cattle and poultry, but never worked at a dairy like her dad. Her father, Ralph Junkin Jr., was raised on a dairy farm with his father, Ralph Sr., who owned a commercial dairy farm for 40 years, before he sold it in the 1990s because of low milk prices.

The Junkin family discussed the idea of opening a dairy farm soon after Vails graduated from MSU. They did their research and visited several southern dairy farms before deciding to take the plunge. Vails and her family wanted to continue her grandfather's legacy and honoring the Junkin family name by opening Circle J Dairy. They began milking cows in December of 2022 and in January 2023, they were selling bottled milk.

"I went to Mississippi State and wasn't sure what I wanted to do career wise, but I knew I always loved working on our farm.

I wanted something that could maybe one day be my own, while still being able to work with my family. We were brainstorming different ideas and decided to visit a dairy farm in south Alabama. My dad, having a strong background in dairy, felt like we could make a go at it and that's how we got the ball rolling," she said.

Operating Circle J Dairy has become a family affair. Vails runs the social media and helps with milk processing, bottling, weekly milk orders, and various other tasks. Her parents, Robin and Ralph Jr., help with a little bit of everything. Their main responsibilities include milking, milk processing, bottling, handling hay for the cows, and managing the company's finances. Other family members including siblings, cousins, grandparents, and in-laws help run the farm as well. They help with bottling, distributing milk on the delivery route, and operating the dairy store where customers can purchase t-shirts and milk or check out the milk production process through the viewing window. Circle J Dairy sells to grocery stores, coffee shops, and restaurants in the surrounding counties, delivering milk multiple times each week. It is truly a team effort to run the farm.

"We milk the cows twice daily, and sometimes pasteurize twice a day depending on how much time we have. We bottle every day and send it on our milk route throughout the week. So, we start around 4:30 a.m. most days and sometimes don't finish until 6:30 p.m. Then we go home and do it all again the next

day. Working with family helps a lot," Vails said.

Circle J Dairy has 50-75 cows year-round. Most are Jersey cows, but about a dozen are Holstein. Vails said the breeds create an evenly rich and fresh milk. The farm does not homogenize their milk, so the cream rises to the top. Consumers should shake the milk well before serving. Vails said the milk should keep three to four weeks if kept at a cold temperature. Non-homogenized milk differentiates local dairy farms from commercial dairies because most milk produced commercially is homogenized. Vails noted that farm fresh milk is especially appealing because you know exactly where it came from.

Vails said she has learned so much from opening her own dairy farm and she enjoys sharing her knowledge with others. Although she loves her job, she shares that a major challenge they face is work-life balance. The family works most holidays because this is more than just a business to them, it's their livelihood.

Vails shared that she thinks her grandfather would be proud of the family for reviving his livelihood. Her newborn daughter, Lula, will grow up on the farm, learning all about dairy processing and hopefully continuing the legacy of dairy farming in the future.

"Carrying on my grandfather's legacy is what I am most proud of. It's a little bit different now, but he would be so proud that we're continuing this because he loved it," she said. "My dad loved it and still loves it, so I know he would be proud of us." 🐾

Ralph Junkin Jr., Robin Junkin, Jessica Junkin Vails, Lula Vails, and Tayler Vails at their dairy in Gordo, Alabama. (Photo by Erin Buckley)

