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**Is it time for kinder dairy farming?**

‘With livestock farming becoming more and more intensive, is it time to rethink how we run dairy farms?’

For organic dairy farmer David Finlay that was the question that refused to go away. Nearly a decade after starting their journey to find a ‘new’ approach to dairying, David and Wilma Finlay launched The Ethical Dairy; their answer to the public’s increasing criticisms of the dairy farming industry.

Their solution? Cow with calf dairy farming - keeping the calves with their mums to suckle, and taking less milk as a result. David Finlay explained:

“What we’re doing is de-intensifying dairy farming. It’s almost the opposite of what’s happening elsewhere in the industry.

“Our goal was to farm in a way that is resilient, ecologically sound and less stressful for the animals. So we’re leaving the calves with their mothers to suckle. It means we take less milk from the cows, but we’re using that milk to produce artisan cheeses.”

Wilma added:

“In traditional dairy farms calves are removed from their mothers within a few hours of their birth. Having married into farming rather than grown up with it, the stress this places on the cow was always very obvious to me and I was *never* comfortable with it. So we wanted to find a way to keep calves with the cows and still have a financially viable farm. We don’t want to have to choose between doing what’s right and staying in business.”

The surge in veganism, with campaigns like Veganuary becoming headline news, may be recent but planning for the Finlay’s ‘revolution in dairy farming’ began a long time ago. Customers of their award winning business, Cream o’ Galloway, a luxury ice cream brand and family visitor centre, have had ringside seats with regular farm tours and information events explaining their change in approach.

Transitioning a family farm to this new model has been a long and expensive journey. It’s involved building a brand new dairy that can comfortably house the growing calves alongside their mums, and when an initial trial run in 2012 failed due to financial pressures there was no shortage of comment from their dairy farming neighbours.

Dumfries & Galloway, where the Finlay’s farm, is home to 45% of Scotland’s dairy industry, so introducing a radically different dairy model in the heart of one of the UK’s biggest dairy regions has not been without challenge. David added:

“Many people in the farming industry think we’re completely crazy. Financially it’s been extremely challenging, but so far our new approach is working. It’s been a steep learning curve and we’ve had to learn a lot of things as we go along, but our new approach has led to big reductions in the use of antibiotics, increases in biodiversity and happier, healthier cows and calves.

“Our cows are living around twice as long as those on a traditional dairy farm and our calves are growing almost twice as quickly as typical dairy calves. At the same time our reliance on inputs, such as cereals and chemicals, has reduced and we’ve increased the net amount of food in our food system by around 80%.”

The Ethical Dairy launched with a range of artisan cheeses last year, and are now adding four organic ice creams to their product range. Since the brand launched last year the Finlay’s have seen interest in the products and their farming system rocket, with strong media interest and a successful crowdfunding campaign. They are hosting the UK’s first Ethical Farming Conference at their farm next month with delegates travelling from as far as New Zealand and the USA to find out more about regenerative and ecological agriculture, and in particular this radically different approach to dairy farming.

David Finlay was named Farmer of the Year at a prestigious animal welfare awards ceremony last week, and his goal for The Ethical Dairy is ultimately to ‘revolutionise the dairy industry’ by persuading other farmers of the benefits of this new system. He said:

“What we want to do is demonstrate that food from the dairy industry can be produced with compassion for our animals, for our people and for our environment. We also hope to show that far from being expensive, food produced this way can actually cost less. This is just the beginning.”

More information about The Ethical Dairy and its products can be found at [www.theethicaldairy.co.uk](http://www.theethicaldairy.co.uk) on Twitter on @theethicaldairy and on Facebook @EthicalDairy

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