Meet Matt Kilgus of Kilgus Farmstead

Matt Kilgus leads me out behind his store front to the barns out back. 50 curious cows turn their heads and blink as we walk by, many of them ambling up to the fence for a closer look. Are they nodding their heads at us, or am I imagining it? That’s weird, I think, it’s like they are saluting us. But then I realize it’s not me they care about, it’s Matt. And maybe they ARE saluting him.

They know they’ve got it good: a warm barn, a free place to roam, fresh grass and grain to eat, and they know Matt is a big part of the reason for that. These are the definition of happy cows.

In fact, if I was wearing a hat right now, I’d be tempted to tip it in salute to Matt Kilgus as well. His family’s dairy, beef, pork, and goat farm, along with their bottling plant, are downright inspirational when it comes to sustainable farming, and to top it off, he just may be the nicest person you will ever meet.

My first encounter with Matt was under less than ideal circumstances. The weather had decided not to cooperate, and the night before our scheduled interview it snowed 6 inches, with more continuing to fall I should have cancelled the visit, but I am stubborn, and cancelling was not in my plans for the day. You can guess what happened. I ended up with my GPS leading me astray and right onto a snow-drift covered road in the middle of no-where. I started to panic at this point.
But there was no need. Matt, despite my terrible directions about my actual location, was able to locate me and brave the now full-on snow storm to pull me out of the drift and back onto a plowed road. Lucky for me, Matt agreed to reschedule the visit and the following week I travelled back up to his farm again for a second try. I made it to the right place this time, and I’m glad I did. The Kilgus Farmstead is definitely worth the visit and Matt’s story is one worth telling.

Farming has always been part of Matt’s life. His father was a farmer. His uncle is a farmer. His cousins are farmers. In fact, it seems like half the Kilgus family is now involved in the Kilgus Farmstead and Dairy operation in one way or another.

Matt bought into the family business with his uncle Paul back in 2002, just a couple years out of high school. At that time, the farm consisted only of dairy cows and tillable farm acres, and the milk was sent away for processing. But Kilgus Farmstead, above all else, is a family farm, and with some of the younger cousins and family members coming of an age where they wanted to join in the family business as well, Matt and Paul began to look for ways to create an opportunity to make that possible. From there, the idea of creating their own bottling plant was born. “When we started researching options we felt we had a good opportunity to add value to a product we were already producing,” Matt says of the bottling plant.

The bottling plant was built in 2009, and the milk produced from the plant was pasteurized but not homogenized. Pasteurization is the heating of milk to kill bacteria and diseases that could be present, while homogenization is the mechanical process of destroying the fat molecules in milk so that the fat is evenly suspended throughout the milk. In non-homogenized milk, the fat (cream) will often rise to the top when the milk settles. Matt explains that there are a few studies that have been done regarding the health benefits of drinking non-homogenized milk. I checked the facts and found out he was right. When the milk is in its natural state, it is easier for the body to digest properly, but when the fat molecules are broken down in the homogenization process, they are not digested properly and are instead absorbed directly into the bloodstream where they are deposited in the arteries.

The decision to not homogenize the milk was a marketing strategy as much as it was a health initiative. “In the beginning we needed to do something that was different than what everyone else was doing,” explains Matt. It was also a huge risk.

At first, the non-homogenized milk was not well received. “Customers would send the milk back saying that it was bad because the cream had separated to the top,” says Matt. But a change in their marketing helped them to overcome this obstacle, and they began to sell their skim milk (which has no fat that can separate to the top) to larger grocery stores, while marketing their whole and 2% milk towards health stores. The addition of a “shake well”
label also seemed to help. In recent years, as consumers are becoming more educated, the market for non-homogenized, locally produced milk has grown, and looks like it will continue to do so. “Now we’re glad we did non-homogenized,” says Matt, “although at first we were worried.”

Today, the bottling plant isn’t the only new addition to the farm. Along with the 140 pasture-raised Jersey cows that Matt and his family milk twice daily (starting at 4:30 a.m.!), the farm also consists of 500 goats and 60 pigs which are raised for their meat. They also grow non-GMO corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and wheat, much of which is used to help feed the animals. And, there are plans in the works for a new compost barn that will be even better for the animals’ comfort, allowing them more room to roam around and loaf in the winter months. Matt and his uncle Paul and both of their wives have also been joined on the farm by Matt’s cousins Justin and Trent and their wives as well.

You can find Kilgus Farmstead meats and other products in their on-farm country store, which also features homemade ice-cream and a variety of other locally-produced items from neighboring farms. Their milk is available throughout central Illinois, and their website is updated frequently with current outlets for consumers.

If you get the chance though, stop by for a farm tour and see for yourself what sustainable farming looks like and what a hard-working farm family can do.