

# Value-added Agricultural Success Story

## *Bonnie Blue Farm*

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

*Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture*



*Gayle Tanner takes a break in the pasture with the dairy goats and guard dogs.*

**I**n 1995, Jim and Gayle Tanner purchased undeveloped property in rural Wayne County with literally nothing but a pre-Civil War chimney on the land. Their plan was to retire far from the urban sprawl of California's Sacramento Valley. Four years later, the couple moved with their 11 dairy goats to reside permanently on what they named *Bonnie Blue Farm*.

Today, *Bonnie Blue Farm* is more than the Tanners' retirement escape. What began as a hobby has turned into the first licensed Grade-A goat dairy in Tennessee, producing award-winning fresh and aged goat cheeses. The idea to open a full-fledged dairy began in the fall of 2003. Gayle met with Wayne County Extension Agent Ken Burress and Peg Hamlett from the Center for Profitable Agriculture (CPA) to explore the possibilities. After Gayle returned from the nearest cheese-making class in Raleigh, North Carolina, the Tanners began researching the ins and outs of small dairies and started adapting ideas to fit their needs.

By June 2004, Jim and Gayle began building their future milking barn and cheese-making facility. They also had to learn about required government regulations and food safety measures, so they met with John Sanford at the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. "The state is used to working with large, traditional (bovine) dairies and so we posed unique challenges," Gayle points out.

Locating equipment for their small-scale production was also a challenge. "Basically, we had to go out of the country to find appropriate equipment. We bought small European units that are no longer manufactured in the U.S."

Gayle says the Center for Profitable Agriculture was very helpful and even cautioned against a dairy as a start-up business because of the high expenditures attached to the dairy. "But we did it anyway," laughs Gayle. "We were highly motivated to make this work."



The Tanners rent their cabin to the public for on-farm stays.



Jim and Gayle believed they had a good product, and the awards they've won, including the 2007 Tennessee Small Farmer of the Year Award, offer proof.

It doesn't hurt that elite chefs are requesting *Bonnie Blue* cheeses either. Currently their products can be found at more than 10 upscale restaurants in Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga and two out of state. Nor has their rural location hampered sales. "Luckily we have great cheese and repeat customers who promote our products by word-of-mouth," says Gayle.

In 2007, Jim traveled more than 37,000 miles selling *Bonnie Blue* cheese at farmers markets and specialty food stores across Tennessee. "The idea of buying locally produced, safe, natural and healthy food makes our cheese in high demand," Jim notes. The Tanners also sell direct from the farm and take Internet and phone orders.

So far, their steadily rising sales have kept pace with their improved production techniques. Gayle says they concentrate on high-quality genetics to keep doe numbers low and milk production high. She gives credit to USDA's Dairy Herd Improvement program, which they use to analyze production records. "It allows us to make educated selections for our breeding stock, striving for long, level lactations. We'll continue to upgrade the herd along the way."

Jim and Gayle are constantly looking for ways to add value to their farming enterprise. They recently added agritourism to their busy schedules, offering educational, hands-on farm tours and on-farm lodging in a hand-hewn log cabin. The tours and cabin rentals evolved out of requests from customers.

After building their new residence above the milking barn, the Tanners began renting out the fully equipped cabin they built when they first moved to *Bonnie Blue Farm*. "People are very interested in connecting with the land and the animals," says Jim. "From doctors to students, we let them get as involved as they want. Some folks come for a day; others stay for a week. It's been great for us. We entertain the visitors and they do the same for us."

**For additional information, contact:**

**Center for Profitable Agriculture**  
University of Tennessee Extension  
P.O. Box 1819  
Spring Hill, TN 37174-1819  
Phone: 931-486-2777  
Fax: 931-486-0141  
cpa@utk.edu  
<http://cpa.utk.edu>

The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:

- Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;
- Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;
- Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.

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E12-4015-00-010-09 75-9/08 08-0250

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