

## Where the Milkman Gets His Milk by Shelli Manning

East Homer, New York is a mere four hour drive from the bustling urban sprawl of New York City, yet in terms of similarities, the two locales may as well be on different planets. East Homer is a sleepy bedroom community, with its population of less than 7,000 depending heavily on nearby cities of Cortland, Ithaca and Syracuse for work. New York City is, well, New York City.



So how do small batches of milk, honey, eggs and other farm fresh products make their way from East Homer to the doorsteps of homes and offices in bustling Manhattan? It's a simple path, paved with passion, ingenuity, hard work and the confidence to follow your dreams. It's a natural partnership; milkman and farmer. After all, the milkman's gotta get his milk somewhere.

It all starts at Trinity Dairy and Farm Store, an operation run by Branden and Rebekah Brown and Rebekah's family, Ken, Sue and Derek Poole. While the family has been farming for four generations, the storefront, niche line of non-homogenized milk and bakery is a considerably newer undertaking.

Despite Branden having no real exposure to farming other than the vegetable farm he grew up on, as a kid he declared to his mom he was going to be a dairy farmer. When he met his would-be wife, Rebekah Poole, in 2009, he had no idea that not only was he going to marry the girl of his dreams, he was also going to be welcomed into a family who would eventually become his partners in business, fulfilling his childhood dream of being a dairy farmer, and then some.

The couple wasn't always 'all in' on the family farm. They both went to college and had careers outside farming. Rebekah's training was in nursing and Branden's trade was electrical. He landed a spot with the CSX railroad and figured that's where he'd stay. It was a position which afforded the kind of security a growing family needs. As time went on, he found what the role didn't afford was any time with the family he was working to support. Branden was away from home more and more and he became quite certain this was not the life he wanted forever.

Then, in 2013, life presented the Pooles and the Browns an opportunity. It was out of the blue, the way life's opportunities often are, and similarly, it would not be for the faint of heart. It would be an endeavor that would take 100% commitment, which for Branden, meant leaving the security of his railroad job behind.

Rebekah's dad, Ken, who was running the dairy farm, learned about a dairyman in South Carolina who'd been doing his own bottling but was hanging up his hat. He was selling all the

equipment and he was selling it at the kind of price that made it impossible to not at least consider. The family had occasionally spoke of creating their own line of milk products, of doing their own bottling and perhaps having a farm store. Here was their break, if only they'd be brave enough to take the risk.

The Poole family farm hadn't experienced the same kind of expansion many farms of today have. Milking an average of 100 to 150 cows, their farm had long since been outpaced by the growth of surrounding operations, a situation certainly not unique to New York State. As the world's demands for food production increases, so must the size of the farms which contribute to it. While Branden had a dream of being a dairy farmer, he had no desire to run a large operation where he knew he'd find less and less time with the cows and more time running the farm business. He wanted to stay small, but knew that wasn't a viable option long term, either.

"In dairy farming, you have three choices," says Branden, "you either grow, find a niche or you quit."

The family took a leap of faith, giving way to what now stands as Trinity Valley Dairy and Farm Store. Creating a niche is exactly what they did. Now going on its fourth year, what started as a pie in the sky idea has become a thriving business, one that's grown in ways the family never imagined.

While most anything you'll find at the Trinity Valley farm store is all natural, at the heart of their distinction is their 'Creamline' brand of milk. Non-homogenized and processed as little as possible, Creamline takes a bit more effort to produce than its homogenized counterpart, but it's worth it. Full of nutrients, probiotics and packed with sweet, wholesome flavor, it's a favorite of customers.



Because of its minimal processing and vat pasteurization, Creamline is easier on the digestive system, oftentimes even tolerated by folks who suffer from lactose intolerance. On Trinity Valley's website you can read about the pasture grazed cows, the unique process of making Creamline and all the benefits people love.

When they were erecting the building to house the bottling equipment and store, Branden took it one step further and added a bakery, fulfilling his wife's dream as well. It's now where she and her mom, Sue, create 'baked from scratch' goodies like bread, pies, doughnuts, soft pretzels and even cheesecakes that are sold both in the store and through their other delivery channels, such as those Manhattan offices.

So how does the milk make it to Manhattan, anyway? Early in 2016, Branden reached out to Frank Acosta, the proprietor of another niche brand, Manhattan Milk, after the two were featured side by side in a New York Times article discussing the modernization of the dairy industry. It turned out Trinity's style of farming - small and all natural - was perfectly in line with Manhattan Milk's passion for returning to old fashioned values and the days of milk in

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glass bottles being delivered right to your door. After several meetings at the farm, the two entrepreneurs came to an agreement and now Trinity Valley Dairy is the exclusive supplier of milk for the Manhattan Milk brand. Branden and company also provide the upscale supplier with farm fresh eggs, honey, maple syrup, bakery products as well as grass fed beef and their newest product offering, cheese curds. While some of the products come from neighboring farms, the majority comes right from Trinity Valley and the quality is maintained through and through.

The family's business isn't all that's grown in the past four years, Branden and Rebekah now have two children - Landen and Lillian. Branden says even though the hours are long - at times much longer than when he was working for the railroad - it's completely worth it to be at home on farm and in the store with their kids and their family. He says it's an investment in their future. As for whether the couple's children will eventually pick up the reins, he says only if they want to. The Poole / Brown family know a little something about kids following their own path considering Branden, the electrician-turned-dairy -farmer, Rebekah, the nurse-turned-baker and even Rebekah's brother Derek has blazed his own path, pursuing his dreams of becoming a fitness model.



For more information about Trinity Dairy, check out [www.trinityvalleydairy.com](http://www.trinityvalleydairy.com) or find them on Facebook. Manhattan Milk can be found at [www.manhattanmilk.com](http://www.manhattanmilk.com), on Facebook or follow them on Instagram, where you'll join the likes of Martha Stewart. (Frank and Matt of Manhattan Milk have even been on Martha's show!) Just proves, if a small town cow in upstate New York can have her milk touted by Queen of the Kitchen, Martha Stewart, pretty much anything is possible if you're brave enough to follow your dreams.

*About the Author:*

ANIMART's staff writer, Shelli Manning, works to share the human interest side of individuals in production agriculture and communicate their passions which contribute to our unique American Story. She is the published author of *Little Fish*, as well as a motivational speaker on women's issues and an advocate for the reduction of domestic violence.