

Organic farmers who are doing it their whey

◆ Couple are dairying to be different in switching from conventional to organic farming to create the Ethical Dairy brand writes Cat Thomson

David Finlay is the third generation of his family to live and work at Rainton farm, near Castle Douglas, and, since taking over in 1992, he and his wife Wilma have embraced diversification.

They have moved from conventional farming to organic methods, made extensive changes to encourage biodiversity, and were early adopters of renewable energy, and installed a wind turbine. They also set up a popular visitor attraction, Cream of Galloway, and launched an ice cream brand.

In January they sold the Cream O'Galloway visitor attraction and ice cream business to Yorkshire-based company Brymor. The couple wanted to solely concentrate their energy on their Ethical Dairy brand, which uses milk from their cow-with-calf dairy to make a range of artisan cheeses.

It was back in 2007 when David and Wilma first realised they wanted to take their business in a new direction. Wilma says: "I think it was David who was the first to say, 'We're making an unsustainable product.' Once you accept that oil is a finite resource how can you justify, either financially or socially, using fossil fuels to make ice cream? The process involves buying ingredients from all around the world. We then heat those ingredients up, cool the mixture down, freeze it, and then hold it in cold stores, refrigerated vehicles, shops and home freezers. We also quickly agreed that the product we should be focusing on for the future should be cheese."

Wilma explains: "Back in David's father's days, the farm had made 15 tonnes of cheese a year until production stopped in 1971. The milk was taken straight from the cow to the cheese vat without being pasteurised. Once the cheese was made, it was stored in ambient conditions without refrigeration. There was very little energy used – apart from lots of physical energy – so surely, we could do the same again?"

It took time to raise over a million pounds to invest in upgrading the cow shed and milking parlour as well as converting a derelict building into a cheese-making dairy. At the same time, they decided they should introduce cow-with-calf dairy farming. Their goal was to put an end to the standard industry practice of removing dairy calves from their mothers soon after birth, which members of the public increasingly



questioned on their farm tours.

In 2012 their first attempt failed after five months. After the painful decision to stop was made David says: "A weight lifted off my shoulders as my heart broke. The cows were stressed even though they had their calves, they didn't want to go into the parlour and the calves drank almost all the milk." This failure pushed the couple to the brink emotionally and financially. So, after making considerable changes, they tried again in 2016, embarking on a three year pilot.

This time they succeeded despite numerous setbacks, publicly committing to the cow-with-calf dairy permanently in 2019. Now the calves stay with their mothers until they are five or six months old. They have a special calf-friendly area that the cows cannot access, and from around two to three months the calves stay overnight in this calf bedroom and they then rejoin their mothers in the morning after milking.

David says: "The cows love this system, and the guys like working here because they just feel good about it." Standing watching a shed filled with cows and calves contently interacting, David gestures and says: "That's our marketing department."

The herd are cross-bred Montbéliarde, Holstein and Viking Red cows. He explains: "We selectively breed big confident cows that are doing well in this system. We breed them for temperament; if a cow is stressed, she won't give us milk. It is as simple as that."

In 2018 Wilma and David launched The Ethical Dairy brand which nailed their colours to the mast. The milk they produce is sold to make the same award-winning ice cream and to provide raw milk to make Ethical Dairy's range of



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cheeses. Cheesemakers on-site make Finlay's original Cheddar, Carrick, Laganory, Rainton Tomme, Garnie, Fleet Valley Blue, Barocco Blue, Skinny Gold and Skinny Red and a limited-edition Bluebell cheese.

The stone barn where they make cheese was derelict, but today visitors can peer in through viewing windows watching the entire process. The herd's unpasteurised milk is brought directly from the milking parlour in a mini tanker which is then pumped into the cheese-making room when it is still warm. It is then turned into cheese, by the careful addition of starter culture and rennet.

Now as well as selling cheese to wholesalers, they have loyal customers who buy directly online. You can take a farm tour to witness for yourself cow-with-calf dairying in action, or book on to a day-long cheesemaking course run by Jayne Herron, the farm's Sales and



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Marketing Assistant. Herron is originally from Bedford and moved to the South of Scotland in 2010. The cheesemaking course is very relaxed and on it, you will learn how to make two kinds of cheese: ricotta and hard cheese. The hard cheese needs to be matured at home for two months before being sampled. The entire process is fun, informative, and surprisingly easy.

David and Wilma Finlay are known for not following the herd when it comes to conventional dairy farming, but my guess is at The Ethical Dairy they will be making delicious-tasting cheese until the cows come home.

Their business is one of eight "local legends" being celebrated by the South of Scotland Destination Alliance. The others are: Wilson's Farm, Allanton Inn, Barony Country Foods, Annandale Distillery, Kitchen Coos and Ewes, Cocoa Black, and Traquair Brewery.



On the menu



Last year's hidden gem winner was Gavin's Mill in Milngavie

Time to vote for your favourite Scottish food and drink hidden gem

◆ Deadline for reader's choice of Hidden Gem of the Year at the Scran Awards is fast approaching, writes Rosalind Erskine



From Michelin-Starred fine dining to coffee shops, and celebrated chefs and spirits, the Scottish food, drink and hospitality scene is a melting pot of talent and innovation, and The Scotsman's Scran Awards will celebrate the very best of this.

The finalists for the 2024 Scran Awards have been announced. And while our panel of expert judges will decide the winners, we're asking our readers to vote for their favourite hidden gem – with finalists from Tayside and Central, south of Scotland, Highlands and Islands, Glasgow and the west, north east Orkney and Shetland and Edinburgh, Fife and east.

The Hidden Gem award celebrates hospitality businesses in Scotland that are off the beaten track, impact the wider community and offer something different to guests.

The finalists for Edinburgh, Fife and east Scotland are Cilantro, Dhoom Indian Streetery & Cocktail Bar and The Radhuni. Over in Glasgow and the west, the finalists are Another Tilly Tearoom, The Prancing Stag and The Wee Farm Distillery.

Those that have made the cut from the Highlands and Islands are Café Cùil, The

Colintraive and The Downright Gabbler. The North east, Orkney and Shetland will be represented in the final by Amity Seafood Larder, Sweet Mummies Kitchen and Tarragon By Graham Mitchell, while the south of Scotland finalists are The Gordon Arms Restaurant with Rooms, The Borders Distillery and The Kenmuir Arms.

Finally, the Tayside and central region will be represented by Killiecrankie House, WEECOOK and Well Fired Pizza.

All finalists will be invited to attend a special awards ceremony on Monday, June 17 at Platform in Glasgow. It will be a must attend event for those working within the Scottish food and drink scene.

Last year's hidden gem winner was Gavin's Mill in Milngavie. Speaking of their award, a spokesperson for the business said: "We're going to keep bringing nice tasting, created-from-scratch products to Milngavie – and offering them something they can't get anywhere else."

One of this year's judges Sue O'Neill-Berest has been the food education manager of Cyrenians. She said: "I have been blown away by the depth of quality in the food and drink/hospitality sector in Scotland. I knew it was world leading, but seeing it all laid out in the submissions really brought it home."

Readers can find out more and vote at www.scranawards.co.uk. The deadline is Friday.

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