

The Dairy Saloon: Where Nostalgia and Education Come Together

Amanda Poelman

Nestled just west of Innisfail, Alberta, where Highway #2 meets Highway #54 along the Calgary-Edmonton corridor, the Dairy Saloon offers a sweet stop for visitors, served up with a glimpse of life on a family farm, and sprinkled with a little nostalgia

The Dairy Saloon first opened its doors in the summer of 2023, right out front of Theo and Elize Van Der Gun's 130-cow dairy operation. "I've always loved history," says Elize, who emigrated with her husband from the Netherlands in 1999. Inspired by her visits to Calgary's Heritage Park - an outdoor living history museum where guests 'step into the past' - Elize says, "I like the look of the old buildings and thought making a small ice cream shop would be a fun way to showcase dairy."

Location, Location

Van Der Gun Dairy is conveniently located right alongside Highway #54, where they see a lot of traffic heading towards Gleniffer Lake in the summer months. A popular spot for camping, boating and fishing, or just relaxing by the beach for the day, "Gleniffer Lake brings a lot of visitors from the major cities and around the province," says Elize. Other nearby attractions include the Markerville Creamery - a butter creamery built in the early 1900's, the Dickson General Store - which pays homage to the Danish community that settled in the area, and the Danish History Museum. "There is a lot to see and do in this area, which really helped us," she adds.



The Dairy Saloon is stocked with 10 flavours of ice cream from June-September.

A Slight Speed Bump

Originally, Elize had hoped to produce her own ice cream. "We had hoped to process our own milk for the ice cream, but due to the regulations in Alberta, this was unfortunately not possible." While every province has different rules regarding micro-processing operations, in Alberta you cannot have a processing license at the same location as your dairy operation license, unless you meet a minimum processing threshold. While there are exemptions, the permits and other factors put on-farm processing out of reach in Elize's mind. "This is my retirement project," says Elize, "I just want it to be a fun experience. People can still come to learn about the farm and enjoy the ice cream, even if it isn't made right here."

An Open Door Policy

One of the goals Elize had for the Dairy Saloon was to increase agri-tourism on the farm. "I've always wanted to showcase our business and how things work here," she explained, "and really dispel any stigma of poor animal welfare on dairies." For several years prior to COVID, the Van Der GUNS hosted school tours for students of all ages, but unfortunately that hasn't bounced back post-pandemic, due to transportation scheduling. Thankfully, the Innisfail Ag Society organizes an annual 'Grade Five Farm Tour Day,' where 150-200 students spend the day touring four different operations in the area, learning about the importance of Alberta's diverse agriculture industry.

The Van Der GUNS also participate in 'Open Farm Days,' an initiative started by the provincial government. The event, held the third weekend in August, sees all types of agriculture business open their doors for tours. "There is everything you can imagine," says Elize, "from dairy to beef, wineries, sheep farms - something for everyone." Since the farm is wheelchair accessible, the family has also hosted tours for seniors and last year they were a pitstop for a bike tour raising funds for cancer research.

"We are very open about everything we do on our farm," shares Elize, who encourages people who stop for ice cream to tour the farm. "I think it's neat for people to come and see the cows, milking process, interact with the baby calves, and be able to ask questions." Being one of approximately 480 dairies left in Alberta, she also believes this experience is very important.

Visit the Saloon

The Dairy Saloon is open from the beginning



The Dairy Saloon entrance offers a little nostalgia, inspired by Elize's love of history.

(L-R) Elize and daughter Suzanna Van Der Gun are always eager to serve customers of the Dairy Saloon.



Van Der Gun Dairy opens its doors regularly for 'Grade 5 Farm Tour Day' and 'Open Farm Days,' to educate the public about dairy farming.



of June to the beginning of September and offers 10 different flavours of Chapman's ice cream - made with 100% Canadian milk. When asked about serving an Alberta product, Elize laughs, "Maybe it's the Dutch in me, but I want to be able to serve a substantially sized and affordable ice cream cone, and that's what I do!" Guests can also purchase coffee, tea, and cold beverages, along with Dutch apple pie and 'boterkoek,' a Dutch butter cake that Elize makes fresh in her certified commercial kitchen. She also sells a small selection of cow-themed gifts, and a variety of Gouda cheese and cheese curds made locally at Sylvan Star Cheese.

In addition to the barn tours, guests can enjoy their ice cream at outdoor picnic tables and play the old-fashioned lawn games that Elize has assembled. The Van Der GUNS also recently extended their fence line so that cows on pasture can graze closer to the Saloon, adding to the dairy ambience and experience.

Although she has some plans to eventually expand the offerings in the store to include eggs from her chickens and butter, Elize has enjoyed all that the Dairy Saloon has had to offer for the past two years and is looking forward to June. *If you're in the area, stop by for a cone and a visit!*



During the winter months, the Dairy Saloon transforms into the home of the West Central Wranglers 4-H Club sewing group - daughter Aimee is learning to quilt.



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