



Just as they did 60 years ago, the Balme Ayr herd grazes from May through August.

Amanda Poelman

Nestled in the scenic Dougan Lake Valley, just south of Duncan on Vancouver Island, Balme Ayr Farms has long been a familiar landmark along the Trans-Canada Highway. As the highway bends around Dougan's Lake, the farm's bright red barn comes into view – a timeless symbol of an operation that was already well established when the Balmes took ownership in 1961.

History Across Two Continents

The Balme family has a rich history in agriculture in the United Kingdom. In the early 1800s, through marriage into the Nettleton family, prominent wool producers from Yorkshire, the Balmes founded a wool brokerage business, Charles Balme & Co., in London. The enterprise grew into one of the leading auctioneers of colonial wool, handling a substantial share of the wool-auction business at the time. In 1939, after working for a year in New Zealand on one of the largest sheep stations, John Balme, very quiet and soft-spoken by nature, knew he wasn't interested in standing up as an auctioneer in the family business, which was taken over by his brother David. John had travelled across Canada by train on his way home and hoped that one day he would return. In the interim, following the war, he raised Ayrshires and pigs on a mixed farm near Twyford.

In 1961, John returned to Canada and purchased the farm in its present location from Joe Saville, a long-time Ayrshire breeder with a prize-winning herd. In a local newspaper article at the time, John was referred to as an 'Englishman Bachelor Farmer.' Aptly named Lakeside Farm due to the proximity of Dougan's Lake, the 136-head and 206-acre farm was one of the largest farms in the Cowichan Valley region.

John didn't stay a bachelor for long, having met the love of his life, Jenny, before coming back to Canada. In 1966, John married Jenny in England, and the pair came back to the Island, welcoming their son Oliver in 1967, followed by son Mike in 1969. Due to her mother's failing health, John and Jenny made regular trips back and forth across the pond.



Oliver (age 9) can barely reach the pedals but is ready to help!



John Balme with OAK RIDGE ROYAL JO EX-2E, the matriarch of the Balme herd and top Lifetime Production Cow in Canada in the 1960s.



David Balme (centre) inspects a bale of wool at Associated Wool Exporters (NZ) during his visit in 1969.

John hired a herd manager to take care of the newly minted Balme Ayr Farms, and he and Jenny purchased Whitebridge Farm, which had a 50-head Holstein herd, so they had somewhere to stay while they were in England. For nearly a decade they managed both operations, but as milk price continued to drop in the UK and it became increasingly challenging to own two farms in two different countries, they decided to sell the business in England and moved back to the Island permanently in 1980.

Incremental Development

The Balmes milked 60 cows in the 1960s and it seemed that every time a new decade started, 10 more cows were added – milking 70 cows in the '70s and so on. John took advantage of "quota months," where if you over shipped during that month, you were able to keep the quota, allowing the farm to continually expand. Balme Ayr milk was shipped to Victoria for processing, first to Palm Dairies, and then to Island Farms by the 1980s.

Western Dairy PIONEERS

BALME Ayr FARMS

Today the Balme Ayr herd, which moved into a WeCover barn in 2010, consists of 135 cows. "Production had been stagnant for some time," shares Oliver, noting that adding a modern feed bunk and two robots increased production by 2L/cow almost immediately. In 2017, a third robot was added and the Balmes saw production increase again. Currently, their cows average 32kgs/day, with 4.51% fat and 3.44% protein on their April milk test. The entire herd is purebred and registered at Ayrshire Canada, with a handful of high-producing Holsteins sprinkled in.

The Balmes own 210 acres and rent 150 acres close by. They grow 200 acres of grass – mainly seeded with a mix of tall fescue, orchard grass and clover, and reserve 30 acres of pasture for the heifers and milking herd, which is grazed from May through August. While enough forage for the herd is produced, alfalfa is purchased, and cows receive a 17% textured grain ration through the robots.

Building on a Solid Foundation

John stuck with the Ayrshire breed because the herd he acquired was very well-bred, having captured Grand Champion titles at the PNE in 1958 and 1959 as well as several other accolades. "My dad always said, 'You can't make a mediocre cow great, but if you start out with good ones, you can keep making them better,'" says Oliver. "The Ayrshires have done us well over the years."

With a foundation of high type-bred cows, the Balmes have focused their attention on production and longevity. "Our cows

The facilities also changed quickly to accommodate the growing herd. In the late '60s, John converted the tie-stalls into freestall housing, and the first milking parlour was built, a DeLaval single-stall parlour, where he could milk up to four cows at a time. In 1973, the Harvestore silo was constructed along with a proper feed bunk for the cows, but by 1980 the overcrowding problem could no longer be ignored, and a new barn was built to give the herd more room and allow for future expansion.

Balme Ayr Farms 2.0

Oliver took over Balme Ayr Farms from his father in 1998, when he and Shelley were married. They currently manage the farm with their son Colin, who returned home full time in 2023 after completing the dairy program at Lakeland College. Oliver and Colin split all the tasks, handling



23% of the Balme Master Breeder points can be traced through bulls they either bred or purchased, including HEATHER GROVE NORTH STAR EX-90, bought by John in the early '90s.

the breeding, herd management and fieldwork together. Shelley takes care of the accounting and registrations, while also training horses and competing in carriage driving competitions. Daughter Katie lives in Yellowknife (NWT), where she works as a heavy-duty mechanic. The Balmes also employ some extra help, including Kerry Doole (now 84), who has milked and worked for the family since 1974, along with Deanna West who has managed herd health for the past 20 years.

are strong and well-built with good feet and legs," says Colin, "and we keep trying to improve teat placement for the robot." Oliver adds, "We are breeding cows for the long term, it pays better to keep a cow around for five or six years, rather than one or two."

Undoubtedly, the cow that has left the biggest impact on the herd was OAK RIDGE ROYAL JO EX-2E. Jo came with the original Saville herd, lived to be 20 years old, and



Oliver, with BALME AYR JUPITER HONOR EX-2E 91, wins the PNE for the second straight year in 1990, before she was sold.



BALME AYR FLINT VG-86, a Royal Jo descendent, made a big impact on the breeding program.



Shelley, Oliver, Katie and Colin with their exhibit at the local Cobble Hill Fair (2019).

produced nearly 100,000lbs of milk in her lifetime, the highest Lifetime Production cow in Canada in the 1960s. She left one EX, one VG and two GP daughters, who can be found in many of the current Balme Ayr pedigrees, including BALME AYR BLINK DALLYS, who scored EX-90 in the April classification round after starting her milking career at only 74 points!

BELLAYRE COPPER DOMINO EX-5E 92 was purchased as a baby calf from the Anderlini herd and produced 123,335kgs of milk in 13 lactations. She was also Grand Champion at Washington's Puyallup Fair in 2015, a show the Balmes traveled to as often as they could. Domino is sired by BIRGHDALE COPPER, a Semex bull bred by fellow Vancouver Island Ayrshire Breeder and longtime friend, Guy Sim. When Guy dispersed his 2X Master Breeder herd in 2024, the Balmes were excited to add some more of Guy's genetics to their barn.

Interestingly, 23% of the points accumulated for their Master Breeder Shield come from cows sired by bulls they either bred or leased privately. "There isn't

as wide of a genetic base as other breeds," says Oliver, "and a lot of Ayrshire bulls today use Swedish Red bloodlines." Raised from their favourite cow families, bulls like BALME AYR FLINT VG-86 (S: NORTH PINE SPARK) and BALME AYR TROUBADOUR GP-80 (S: IO WAYSIDE VAGABOND), from the Royal Jo line, and BALME AYR DOMINATOR EX-90 (S: HUNNINGTON FAMOUS) and BALME AYR DURANGO EX-90 (S: LEGACE RISTOURN) from the Domino family, have made a big impact on the Balme Ayr breeding program. Additionally, HEATHER GROVE NORTH STAR EX-90, purchased in the early 1990s, left his mark through several daughters and his son BALME AYR CYRUS VG-86.



There are less than 10 Holsteins in the barn, but BALME GARRETT INCOME 1 EX-90 3E produced over 170,000kgs lifetime and was 2nd Fat production cow for her age (14 years) in Western Canada in 2025.

For many years, the Balmes used 50% AI sires and 50% bulls they'd purchased and developed their own sons from. Now sexed semen is used on the cows, with bulls like MERINO, CATALYST, BOURNSTAR and DALTON filling the tank, while beef semen is used on heifers. Shelley says, "We aren't afraid to use old bulls and see how they perform in today's environment."

Utilizing the Genetic Toolbox

The Balmes place a lot of value on milk recording, classification and the use of genomic testing for youngstock. "We have just started doing some genomic testing," says Colin, "but we could be doing more with our youngstock to advance our genetics more quickly. I'd really like

Achieving a Dream

Oliver and Shelley had just sat down to breakfast when they received the phone call from Ayrshire Canada General Manager, Michel Boudreault. "It's a huge honour to receive this award," says Oliver, who first shared the news with Colin, away in New Zealand on the World Ayrshire Youth Tour, followed by his mother, Jenny - now 98 years old and living in Abbotsford. "It's really nice to see the work pay off," shares Colin.

Oliver and Shelley travelled to Thetford Mines, QC, at the beginning of March to take in the farm tours, Ayrshire Canada AGM and the Master Breeder Gala. "It was a great experience," says Shelley, "We enjoyed connecting with fellow Ayrshire breeders!"



Proud to be BC's newest Master Breeder! (L-R) Colin, Shelley and Oliver Balme.

to start testing all of them to see what they can do." In Oliver's mind, the lack of Ayrshire herds in Western Canada make classification even more important to maintain information for the breed.

While showing cattle was part of their past, Oliver says, "Showing has become difficult with ferry costs and the lack of breed shows near us. We definitely made more of an effort when our kids were in 4-H." Despite that, a moment Oliver is still very proud of is winning Grand Champion at the PNE with BALME AYR JUPITER HONOR EX-2E 91 in 1989 and 1990. Sired by GLEN NETHY JUPITER, another one of John's early bull purchases, Honor won the Production Award before being sold to Triple S Farms. Her son, BALME AYR MEDALLION EX-90, was sold to Mapleburn Ayrshires in Quebec, siring over 100 daughters in herds there.



Current herd favourite BALME AYR BLINK DALLYS EX-90 can be traced back to Royal Jo.

With 'winning a Master Breeder Shield' checked off the 'to-do' list, the Balmes have set their sights on becoming #1 in Canada for large-herd production again and remain committed to the development of their high producing herd. Improvement projects have included a larger bulk tank in 2025, and an automatic calf feeder earlier this year, with mats planned for the heifer section of the main barn. Adding the DeLaval activity tags has already proven to be a great investment, allowing Oliver and Colin to get cows bred back more quickly.

While much has changed in the Dougan Lake Valley over the decades, the values that built Balme Ayr Farms remain unchanged - driven by a steadfast commitment to continually improving their herd and passion for the Ayrshire breed.

