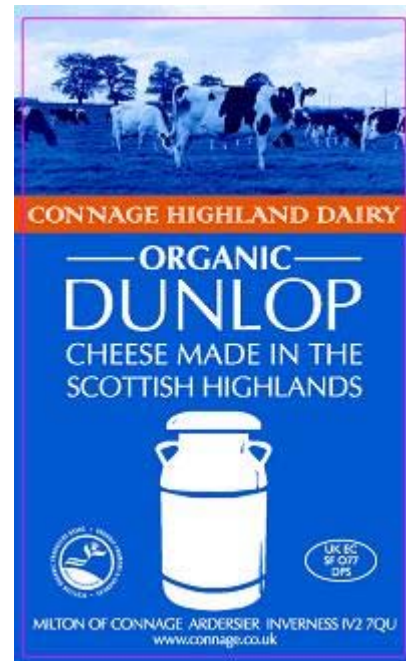
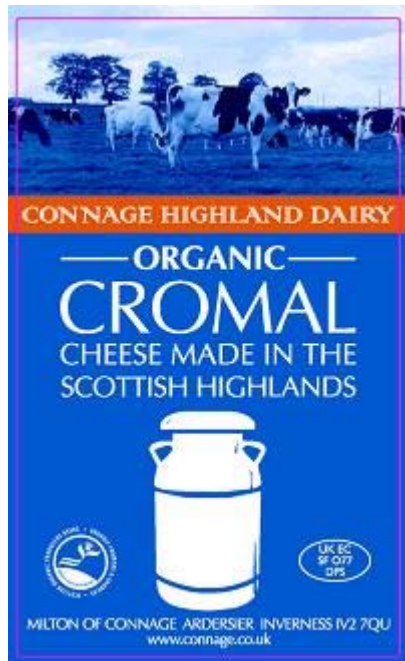


CONNAGE HIGHLAND DAIRY GOES FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH AFTER SUCCESS AT 2006 HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS FOOD AND DRINK AWARDS



Hamish Clark started dairy farming at Milton of Connage at Ardesier 55 years ago. Although he has now retired, his sons Cameron and Callum took over the family farm and together with their respective wives, Jill and Eileen, have built the business Connage Highland Dairy. Originally this small family firm ran an organic dairy, solely selling milk. The Clarks also own a flock of breeding ewes and grow their own organic carrots and potatoes on their land. The family sought to diversify their business and consider how they could add value to the milk they were already producing. The four partners undertook extensive research and feasibility studies, which led to the establishment of their cheese manufacturing business.

The dairy diversified into cheese manufacturing in November 2005 and their first cheese products were on the market in January 2006. Their range of organic and vegetarian cheeses is sold throughout the UK and the family run business is now looking to further extend their export market.

Speaking of the move into cheese production, Jill Clark said: “We spent a long time researching our new business. We’ve had tremendous support along the way from the local enterprise company who has assisted with grants, training and advice. There was a lot of work involved; we had to build the dairy and buy equipment. My husband Callum and brother-in-law Cameron travelled extensively to source suitable machinery and we ended buying some of the equipment from the Netherlands. Not only did we have to learn how to make cheese, we had to refurbish much of the second hand equipment.



Having invested in a welder, Cameron soon discovered he had a talent for welding stainless steel and renovated some of the second hand equipment himself.”

They have an organic dairy herd of 130 cows, mostly Holstein Friesian with Jersey crosses and as Jill Clark, partner in the business explains, they have recently introduced a new breed of cattle: “Recently we’ve introduced some Norwegian Reds, which are known for their longevity and their milk is conducive to cheese making.

What’s unique to our organic farming methods here, is that we grow all our own feed. The cows eat a clover-based diet, which adds greatly to the quality of the cheese. We have our own mixing wagon in which we mix the feed using our own organic carrots and potatoes, plus some mixed grains. This means that our products are all fully traceable from cow to cheese.”

Jill also drew attention to the fact that cheeses are seasonal, saying: “The cheeses have different flavours in summer and winter. They taste different according to whether the cows are outside grazing the clover pastures or indoors eating the feed we produce here during the winter.

Connage Highland Dairy put forward their range of four cheeses for the Highlands & Islands New Product Award last year. They are Clava (brie style), Connage Dunlop, Cromal (a semi-hard cheese) and Connage Crowdie. The Clark family is now selling a smoked Dunlop, with

the cheese being smoked at the Summer Isles organic smokehouse at Achiltibuie. The company is growing in confidence all the time. Winning two awards at the Highlands & Islands Food and Drink Awards really helped the business according to Jill. Speaking of their success, she commented: "Winning awards at last year's Highlands & Islands Food and Drink Awards has made a huge difference to us. Being such a young company and a small family team, the awards have given us increased confidence and assisted us in many ways. I'd urge any food and drink company to take the time and effort to submit an entry for one of these fantastic awards; recognition from the industry has helped us develop new markets and products in this, our second year of business. It doesn't matter how small your business is; it's worth getting involved – and don't be put off by the thought of having to complete forms and submit lots of information; just let your products speak for themselves!"

The judges for last year's awards commended Connage for their marketing materials and packaging that were designed by Skye based Pelican Design, as Jill explains. "We worked closely with Phil Slater of Pelican Design Consultants; he totally understood our brief for a contemporary, yet traditional look for our product packaging and we're thrilled with what he came up with."

Connage Highland Dairy now employ 6 people full time; including Piotr (Peter) from Poland, who was made redundant in his home country and came to Scotland looking for work. Jill explains: "When he phoned to enquire about work, his English wasn't that good, and I thought he was looking for work milking the cows. However when he arrived, we learned he had been a cheese maker at home in Poland and he's been a tremendous help to us all here on the farm. He's now being fully trained in organic cheese production and he and his family live locally."

The food and drink industry in the Highlands and Islands generates in excess of £1 billion per annum and supports over 24,000 full time jobs across the region. There is a wide range of diverse products including fish and shellfish, meat and dairy products, biscuits and confectionery and an equally diverse profile of businesses, from internationally renowned Baxters of Speyside to small innovative producers supplying niche markets.