

Szarzynski, Christine Black, “Regenerating the Local Ecosystem and Producing Quality Food,”
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Tending eighty to 120 layers, processing several hundred broilers a year, processing about a dozen hogs a year, milking seven dairy cows, raising a few cow-calf beef cow pairs while finishing four to six steers a year, raising 40 sheep, and raising a three-year-old and four-month-old – Jesse and Vanessa Massucco of Suncatcher Farm in Moravian Falls, NC are busy and joyful.

“Each day is a diversity of activities which we love,” they said. In addition to their 15-acre homestead, they lease three farms for grazing and have learned the value of modeling good practices for marketing and community building. “Everyone has been very happy with us. Some people at first were not that interested in our products until they saw our practices,” Jesse said, adding that landowners are quickly converted to their regenerative practices including rotational grazing, sometimes as much as three times a day in the growing season.

“Don’t underestimate the value that a landowner can receive, looking out their window at some fat cows munching on green grass,” Jesse said. “It might be all the lease payment that is due.”

The couple has had exciting and eventful lives before farming. They worked in the skiing industry, ice climb guiding in Alaska, and tree trimming in Hawaii as well as working on World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms Around the World, including a horse powered farm in Norway. The Massuccos began homesteading in 2021, transitioned some dairy goats away from grain and bought their first grass-fed dairy cow that year and “never looked back,” Jesse Massucco said.

They share the work between the two of them with an occasional intern, who may work between April and September.

One of their greatest challenges with grass-fed farming is matching nutrient requirements with available forage for different groups of animals (dry, lactating, growing, and finishing) to make sure each group is getting adequate nutrition for its production needs, Jesse Massucco said.

“We do this via breeding season, seasonal dairy production, and buying in steers for finishing at specific times,” he said. They have settled on St. Croix sheep with Barbados and Dorper influences for their flock.

“On the dairy side, finding quality grass-only animals has been exceedingly difficult,” he said, adding that they milk mostly Jerseys. This year, they began breeding Jerseys to a Senepol bull, hoping to produce future cows that are $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{8}$ Senepol to foster better heat and Fescue tolerance. Fescue dominates the perennial pastures in Western North Carolina where they live. On the beef side, they have been buying in steers that are smaller framed crosses of various breeds, including Red Angus, South Poll, Mashora, Baldy, and Black Angus. Up until this year, they bred their Jerseys to smaller framed Jersey bulls, some they owned and some they rented. They do not use Artificial Insemination.

The bull is introduced the last week of June for April calving with the ram introduced around Thanksgiving for end of April lambing, giving them a separation between peak calving and peak lambing while still dropping calves and lambs onto growing grass with low chance of cold weather.

Their area receives about 50 inches of rainfall a year, fairly consistently dispersed. Drought tends to be seasonal.

Grazing at high density with frequent moves, two to three times per day, they adjust the degree of utilization when they see conditions start to dry out, and with a little alfalfa supplementation for the dairy cows if necessary, they stretch rotation out long enough to get back into wet weather, Jesse Massucco said. In the case of fall drought, it has paid for the Massuccos to feed hay and allow fescue to stockpile for the winter.

Operating mostly on leased land with lots of terrain, they have seeded very little. The majority of their pastures are cool-season perennial dominant, including fescue, orchardgrass, plantain, and red and white clover.

“Since introducing our management, we have seen more warm season perennials, including purpletop, Gama grass, and, of course, the much-maligned Johnson grass, which we love,” Massucco said. They also welcome forbs, goldenrod, milkweed, butterfly weed, and dogbane, he said, as long as they are part of the mix and not dominant.

In a recently acquired new lease with some bottomland, conducive to annuals, they have experimented with cereal rye, millet, and sorghum sudan. “But this experience has underscored to us the value of perennials as our climactic events become even more unpredictable,” Massucco said.

They advise new farmers to start small to make small mistakes, as farming is already risky enough, Massucco said. They also advise keeping good records. They are close to quality markets where they sell their products while land prices in their region have almost doubled in the last five years with wealthier city dwellers moving to rural areas.

By having enterprises that use modular and mobile infrastructure, they have been able to capitalize on the changing hands of agricultural land.

“We focused on building relationships with landowners within a five-mile drivable radius of our home farm, and in four years, we have secured three leases that have allowed us to grow with limited capital investment,” Massucco said, adding that many new land owners are interested in regenerative agriculture but are unprepared for the amount of work that managing large properties entails,” he said. With their newest lease, they passed 100 acres without tractor.

They direct market everything they produce with a web site and social media.

“Honestly, we can’t keep up with the demand, and marketing has never been an issue,” he said. They sell directly off the farm from a farm store, constructed from a worn pop-up camper. They sell pet milk, eggs, chicken, beef, pork, and lamb directly to consumers. They and the two other producers in their area have wait lists, they said.

Their diversified farm keeps them moving through the seasons without monotony.

“We do pastured broilers and layers as well as compost-turning hogs that are all organically-fed in addition to our ruminants. We also enjoy gardening and orcharding when we are not working with animals,” he said.

Grass-fed dairying was one of the most difficult animal enterprises we could have started with, Massucco said, and it’s miraculous that we are still in business.

“If we had started on a larger scale, we definitely wouldn’t be,” he said. “We started on the smallest scale possible with one cow and made the big mistakes early when the consequences were very small.”

A winch style bale unroller that can be towed by their tractor has been a great investment, they said. They milk in the field with cows hooked to a hay wagon that doubles as a shade structure in

the summer. They milk with a portable milk machine that runs on a drill battery. Their low capital investments with high labor have allowed them to cash flow their farm without significant starting capital or inherited farm infrastructure, Massucco said. In addition, they use plasson quick couplers for putting water all over the farms and use a portable water tank through the winter with a valve sold by Russ Wilson that bleeds a small mount of water to keep the supply line from freezing.

“Sure beats permanent waterers, concrete, and gravel skits,’ Massucco said. Vanessa and Jesse met in college where Jesse earned a degree in Agriculture and Vanessa in Psychology. They did not grow up farming so have remained adaptable and teachable.

“We wanted to regenerate our local ecosystems and feed our communities with the highest quality food possible,” Massucco said. They look forward to growing many more years and making memories.

Overflowing the milk pail for the first time; the first calf born on their farm; spring grass emerging on their newly clearly silvopastures; and lassoing unbroken dairy cows are a few of their favorite recent memories.

For more information about Suncatcher Farm, visit their web site at suncatcherfarmnc.com or contact Jesse or Vanessa Massucco at suncatcherhomestead@gmail.com or phone 336-262-7213