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Ard's Dairy's agritourism business blossoming



Ard's Dairy in Ruth is one of the newest additions to Mississippi's agritourism industry.

A third-generation family-owned and -operated farm, Ard's Dairy is a unique installment in south Mississippi agribusiness because it is the first known working dairy farm in the region to open its doors to the public.

Farmer Pat Ard and his wife Bonnie have always been interested in finding ways to diversify their income. With economic conditions affecting the price of milk and the cost of running a dairy, keeping the farm self-sustaining has been difficult.

It was a visit to nearby Mitchell Farms in Collins that inspired Julie Ard-James, the Ards' daughter who holds a degree in hospitality management, to convince her parents to get into agritourism.

While enjoying the Mitchell's pumpkin patch and country store, her wheels started spinning. "I told Daddy, 'Why aren't we doing this?' I was very impressed with what they were doing," said Julie, who lives in Hattiesburg with her husband Patrick and comes home to the farm weekly.

"I have friends in Hattiesburg who are always saying to me, 'I wish I had somewhere to take the kids on the weekend.' Finally, I realized how blessed we were. Because at first I thought, 'Who wants to come to the dairy farm?' "

The Ards have already started touring groups. In the spring they gave tours to three school classes and a group from the Baptist Children's Village.

Julie comes home to the farm to guide the tours and educate people about the dairy farm.

Ard's Dairy has more than just tours to offer. There is a cozy farmhouse available for weekend getaways or company cook-outs. The three-bedroom brick home has recently been redecorated with inviting textures and cheerful colors, like the bold black-and-white cowhide rug in the living room and cotton quilts tossed on the beds.

Visitors can have as little or as much access to farm activities and fishing holes as they like. They can fish at the creek or in one of the ponds. Anglers are likely to reel in perch, bass and catfish. There is a hammock and a place for building a bonfire so visitors can soak up nature into the night.

"It's been overwhelming how much interest we've had in it," Pat Ard said. "When I was growing up everybody had a farm. But even rural kids now aren't familiar with farm life."

"These kids that come out here, many of them don't know where their milk comes from," Julie said. "One little boy, when I asked the class if they drank milk from a cow said, 'No, I drink the kind of milk that comes from cartons in the cafeteria.'"



"One of the things that's good about having kids come out here is that they learn about where their cheese, milk and dairy products come from," Pat Ard said. "We are in the 2 percent of those that feed 98 percent of the population."

In October, Ard's Dairy will be open Wednesday through Saturday nights for a "flashlight maze." They will also be open at 10 a.m. on Saturdays to welcome visitors to the farm, and concessions will be available. Admission is \$7 for the day and \$5 for the maze.

Pat Ard said county extension agents have worked with him from the beginning to get the agritourism running. Union County Extension Agent Stanley G. Wise Jr., who has experience in making mazes, came down to help the Ards cut their corn field maze.

"This year I've helped 10 farms make mazes," Wise said. "It's fun for families and kids to come into the field and play and find their way out. (Mississippi State University) has given me the flexibility and allowed me to go and help farmers create mazes. They've allowed me the training to do it so I can go out and help farmers who are just getting into this, so the farmers can learn how to do it themselves."

"Agritourism is not only good for farmers," said Lincoln County Extension Agent Rebecca B. Bates. "It's good for the community. Kids get to learn about how a farm works and where their food comes from."

But Bates and Wise said agritourism is not for every farm. "You have to be a people person. You have to want to invite the public into your home, really, but it makes a great addition to a farm family's income," Bates said.

Wise said there are also several maze companies that will come in and help with designing and cutting a corn maze. "I tell people it really is rocket science," Wise said of the process he uses to map out mazes. Julie chose the design for the maze — the farm's logo of a cow jumping over the moon and stars — and with software, a drawing, a handheld GPS unit, Wise and a worker on a zero-turn mower cut out the Ard's 10-acre corn maze.

"I think the people who are going to go out there are going to have a unique experience — they will get to see a true working family farm," Wise said.