

Vierra Dairy: More than a Pretty Show Ring Face

When asked what the name Vierra Dairy Farm evokes, many in dairy circles would mention show-winning cows. That is fair. Vierra Dairy has earned more than its share of hardware and banners in the show ring in recent years and just performed a first for World Dairy Expo—a clean sweep of champions in the Jersey show.

But show cows are just the tip of the iceberg for this 6,000-cow, multi-generational dairy in Hilmar, Calif. And the dairy is just one aspect of a much larger enterprise that includes a feed company, a record label, and several state-of-the-art dairy tech companies.

What are the commonalities that tie together this widely diverse group of ventures? At the helm of each is Maria Swanson, current matriarch of the Vierra family. All strive for excellence, and all operate with a mission to glorify God.

Vierra Dairy Farm is a mixed herd of about 3,000 Jerseys and 3,000 Holsteins. Cows are managed on multiple farms in Hilmar. Maria Swanson is a third-generation owner. Her eldest daughter and son-in-law, Maia and Peter Cipponeri, oversee operation of the dairy while Eddie DeRocha manages day-to-day activities. Another 75 full-time employees help with operation of the farm.

Vierra Dairy has been enrolled on REAP since February 2017. The milking string on the main farm ranks fourth in the nation for milk and fifth for protein with an

actual average of 22,763 lbs. milk, 1,024 lbs. fat and 820 lbs. protein on 469 cows. Five animals owned by Vierra Dairy or in



Thousands of consumers and dairy producers follow Vierra Dairy Farm on Facebook and Instagram to learn about dairy farming and Registered Jersey genetics and to keep up with twins, River and Reagan, pictured here with Dad Peter and Mom Maia. All photos except World Dairy Expo courtesy Leann Castellanos/C Street.

partnership with Semex rank among the top 100 females for genetic merit.

It All Started with Cows

The eclectic venture has humble beginnings that trace four generations back to Tony and Angie Vierra, who married in 1940 and established a dairy farm in Hilmar with three unregistered Holstein cows named Enos, Snookums and Topsy. The Vierras moved to several other locations in Merced County in the 1940s and 1950s

and eventually settled on the present farm in Hilmar. Over the years, the farm grew to 1,500 acres and the herd to 5,000 cows.

The farm was transitioned to their son, Anthony, and his wife Marie, and then to their eldest daughter, Maria, who married Matt Swanson in 1988.

The Swansons were entrepreneurs as well, moving to Turlock, Calif., in the late 1800s and establishing their reputation as leaders in the turkey industry. Among the businesses they established was Associated Feed & Supply Company Inc. The multi-million-dollar company provides animal nutrition products and other farm supplies to clients in Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Associated Feed also markets an extensive line of show supplements for cattle, sheep and swine.

Matt eventually became president of Associated Feed, and, the Swanson-Vierra union grew to a much larger production agriculture enterprise. In time, other ventures were added, including the cloud-based Milc group and the in-vitro fertilization (IVF) facility Boviteq California.

And while production agriculture was in their blood, Matt's true passion was music. In 2017, he founded Riser House with Jennifer Johnson and flagship artist Mitchell Tenpenny, who later topped the country charts with "Drunk Me" in December 2018. The full-service publishing house

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2021 International Jersey Show. Photo courtesy Cowsmopolitan.



Vierra Dairy

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based in Nashville also works with rising stars Dillon Carmichael, Karl Michael, Logan Murrell, and Meghan Patrick, and legend Ronnie Milsap.

Going Jersey

For most of its life, Vierra Dairy Farm has been a commercial, unregistered Holstein operation with a few Jerseys. In 2016, an eventful move prompted more Jerseys—the dairy began shipping milk to Hilmar Cheese Company. The cheesemaker founded by Jersey breeders pays a premium for high component milk that yields more product than average milk, so it made more economical sense for Vierra Dairy to milk more Jerseys.

But the component advantage wasn't the only reason for the brown cows. "We wanted more Jerseys for three other primary reasons," noted Peter Cipponeri. "One: Jerseys are more tolerant of the heat here in Hilmar than Holsteins. Two: Jerseys are more fertile. Three and of most significance: Jerseys are more feed efficient. This is a huge bonus for us, with limited resources (water and acreage) to produce feed."

"When you push the pencil, you realize you can no longer ship Holstein milk exclusively for a profit. Transportation costs alone make it unprofitable."

"When we decided to up Jersey numbers, we decided to get the 'right' Jerseys," Peter continued. "The 'right' Jerseys were Registered Jerseys with tremendous, production-bred genetics and commercial pedigrees."

To meet their demands, they needed look no further than their own back yard, where some of the most productive Registered Jersey cows were milked. The foundation for much of the current commercial Vierra dairy came from their Hilmar neighbors and other dairies in California, Idaho, and Oregon. Truckloads were also sourced from the Midwest through Jersey Marketing Service. Vierra Dairy bought high-end genomics and show cattle from Jersey breeders across the country through private treaty and elite sales like the All American Jersey Sale and National Heifer Sale.

To grow the upper end of the Jersey herd, Vierra Dairy adopted an extensive IVF program, implanting Jersey embryos in Holstein recipients and lower-end Jerseys. Over 750 donor dams are flushed annually, yielding 500-plus viable embryos each month, and resulting in numerous heifer calves each year. Though most donor dams are elite genomic animals, Vierra Dairy also flushes show cows. This effort produces about 100 heifers each year.

The IVF program was augmented in April 2021 when Vierra Dairy partnered with Boviteq to open a satellite facility



Cows at Vierra Dairy are milked in a state-of-the-art parallel rotary parlor, fitted with blue cow guards that ideally position feet for milking and an interactive data display that keeps workers abreast of activities in real time.

in Hilmar. Led by Dr. Ramon Tosta, the facility specializes in handling young dairy donors, lactating show cows and beef donors.

Commercial matings at Vierra Dairy are made almost exclusively using sexed semen from Semex because the company offers Immunity+ with bull proofs. Along with this index, Vierra Dairy also considers



Vierra Dairy is operated with a wide range of new technology to improve efficiency, increase cow comfort and reduce carbon footprint, including this methane digester installed in August 2020.

transmitting abilities for pounds of milk, fat and protein and udder traits through Jersey Udder Index. Bulls chosen as service sires for show cows are based on pedigree and proofs for type and udder traits.

Vierra Dairy has developed a solid market for Jersey genetics, sending about 60 bulls to A.I. each year and selling most of the show heifers born each year. Bulls are whimsically named after musicians. The first bull sold to Semex was JX Vierra Clapton {4}-ET. Then came bulls christened with the likes of "Aerosmith,"

"Billy Joel," "Elvis," "Pearljam," Prince," and "Sinatra." The highest-ranking of these G-code bulls is Vierra Tenpenny-ET, currently #9 with a GJPI of +143.

There are plenty of genomic standouts in the heifer pens too, including several members of the "Winnie" cow family developed by Lucky Hill Farm of Danville, Vt. Vierra Jasmine-ET, out of JX Lucky Hill Wildflower {6}-ET, ranks #13 in the breed with a GJPI of +165. Vierra Dairy purchased "Wildflower {6}" from the All American Jersey Sale in 2017 and another member of the cow family, JX Lucky Hill Whiskey {6}-ET, at the National Heifer Sale in 2019. Both rank for genetic merit and have multiple progeny ranked for GJPI as well.

Show String

Show cattle were introduced to Vierra Dairy to counterbalance the genomics and offer customers a mix of high-end genetics. Shows heifers are raised at Boviteq California. Show cows are managed with the herd at Triple-T Holsteins in North Lewisburg, Ohio.

Why house such precious commodity 2,400 miles away? The animal care and commitment of farm owners Nathan and Jenny Thomas is unmatched.

"When we started talking about show cattle, Jersey mentor and advisor Hank Van Exel said, 'If you are going to go this route, you need to work with Nathan and Jenny. They are the best in the business,'" noted Peter.

"We were introduced and bonded immediately. It was the start of not just a business arrangement, but a close friendship with people we consider to be family."

"They take amazing care of the cattle, and we let them do their thing. They handle virtually everything, from cattle purchases to matings and getting cattle ready for the show."

The show ventured started with the purchase of Showdown Justine in 2018. She was named Reserve Grand Champion of the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair and All-Canadian Senior Three-Year-Old that year. The following year, she took top honors in the Canadian National Show and shared the spotlight at World Dairy Expo with a new herd-mate, Bri-Lin Valson Spritz (the breed's most recent cow to be appraised Excellent-96%). The two were named Reserve Grand Champion and Grand Champion, respectively, of the 2019 International Jersey Show. Vierra Dairy earned the Premier Exhibitor banner as well.

When the dust settled from the pandemic in 2020 and exhibitors resumed activity at the All American, Vierra Dairy walked away with class winners in the junior heifer, aged cow and lifetime production classes and reserve winners in the senior heifer calf, milking yearling and senior three-year-old classes. They also showed the Reserve Overall Premier Performance Cow and won the Premier Exhibitor banner.

This year, at the International Jersey Show in October, Vierra Dairy earned Grand Champion with "Spritz," Reserve Grand and Intermediate Champion with Summer Breeze Tequila Gayle, and Junior Champion with SVHeaths Kid Rock Jaden, a heifer they purchased from the Best of Triple T and Heath sale in May. They also defended their title as Premier Exhibitor and earned three additional blue ribbons for class winners.

In November, Vierra Dairy was again named Premier Exhibitor of the All American, bolstered with All Americans in four classes and Reserve All Americans in another three. They also showed "Gayle" to Reserve Intermediate Champion honors. Marketing

Vierra Dairy Farm is keenly aware of the term "branding" and has been highly effective promoting its genetics to other dairy producers and the dairy industry to consumers.

"There is a place for all media outlets," commented Peter. "We use print media like the Jersey Journal to reach other dairy producers with a specific targeted message and social media to reach the masses quickly."

Vierra Dairy has a base of more than 6,600 followers on Instagram and 2,500-plus on Facebook. Built on quality rather than quantity, the dairy posts on each platform about six times a month. Posts offer a

mix of content, showing how technology is used on the farm, featuring employees and their roles, relaying the benefits of dairy nutrition, and promoting proud farm moments. But hands down, the most popular posts show everyday farm activities of adorable, three-year-old twins, River and



It is not every day a country music group visits a dairy. But when you are one of the owners of Riser House Records, it does happen, like the time Jon Pardi, center, and his band toured Vierra Dairy last summer to learn about dairy farming and Registered Jersey cows.

Reagan.

A new marketing endeavor for Vierra Dairy is a consignment sale—the Amplify Event—at the farm on March 5, 2022.

"Our goal with the sale is two-fold: offer elite show and genomic animals and showcase a commercial dairy using a wide range of the latest technology," said Peter. "We are opening our doors to community and other dairy producers so we can learn from each other."

Of interest to dairy producers will be the new facilities, most built since 2016. Cows are milked in a DeLaval parallel rotary PR3100. The 80-bail parlor has a cow-and-a-half entry, 15-degree angled stalls and an exit bow that encourages cows to turn away from the deck, reducing congestion. A teat sprayer robot, aka TSR, saves on labor and uses less than 14 milliliters of dip. Blue cow locators on the parlor floor position rear feet ideally for unit application and teat dipping. Five drives and sensory notices make for quick and easy emergency repairs by service provider Total Dairy Solutions. Vierra Dairy also uses DelPro interactive data display (IDD), which shows and voices a myriad of information in real time.

Vierra Dairy uses the cloud based One app (milk group) to manage feed, monitor milking equipment, and train and connect with employees. Milk is direct loaded from the parlor onto bulk milk tankers and transported to Hilmar Cheese.

Milking cows are housed in a combination of free-stall barns and a Saudi style loafing pack barn. Water used in the milk barn is completely recycled. A new manure separator using the Biolyнк Flush System

was installed in August 2020. The system separates manure into solids and liquids in two stages and is set up for a methane digester as well.

Doors to the new Boviteq California facility will also be open, with demonstrations on technology and breeding strategies, including those for beef embryos in dairy cattle.

The sale will feature 120 lots of Jerseys and Holsteins from Vierra Dairy and guest consignors. A balance of elite genomics and show genetics will be available, including the syndication of Vierra Sting-ET, a son of River Valley Joyride-ET out of "Spritz" and JX Vierra The Boss {6}-ET, a son of JX Sunset Canyon Got Maid {5}-ET out of Progenesis Madison-ET. "The Boss" is one of three bulls that lead the list of G-code bulls with a GJPI of +166.

Sale goers will also be treated to a live concert by artists from Riser House Records.

The Next Big Thing

The next "big" thing for Vierra Dairy may not be big at all. In fact, Vierra Dairy is striving to be smaller through self-sufficiency, consolidation, and a smaller carbon footprint.

"We do as much on the farm as we can ourselves. We have no desire to be bigger, only better."

This mindset has ultimately contributed to the development of new technology and adoption of other technology to reduce labor, improve cow comfort, and better steward the land at Vierra Dairy.

Will there be other ventures along with the cows, feed company, dairy tech, and record label? Maybe. Probably. The only certainty is that every venture needs to align with the family's purpose.

"At the end of the day, we want to be a blessing and a light in an increasingly dark world," said Peter. "As we chase the next 'big' thing, we always ask: will this bring Glory to God?"

"Our goal is to hear the words 'good and faithful servant' when our race is done."