Growing up in the United Kingdom, which is ranked within the top 20 countries listed by milk consumption-per-capita, I continued to drink fresh milk past my early childhood years into adulthood. One way or another, to cool a cup of tea, with cereal, to cook with, or to dunk a biscuit into during my university days, fresh milk has always been part of my diet. At least until I moved to PNG. During visits to Lae on holidays before taking the plunge to move here permanently two years ago, I found fresh milk wasn’t presented with the rest of breakfast. Instead, a carton of UHT was offered when asked if I took my coffee white.

I had heard of ultra-high-temperature (UHT) milk but never had a reason to drink it. It didn’t take me long to discover that every local supermarket is heavily stocked with this “long-life milk”, unsurprising given the tropical climate and the high percentage of the population who live without the luxury of a refrigerator. When I learned that my husband, who grew up in Lae, used to go with his mother to collect fresh milk for the family once a week from a farm just outside of town,” I was keen to find out if it still existed and if I, too, could buy fresh milk to have at home. To my delight, I learned that the 6 Mile Dairy Farm, established by the Evangelical Brotherhood Church of PNG in 1976, is still very much in operation and stands today as the only dairy product produced by Morobe Province but in the whole of PNG. It was founded in cooperation with the Swiss Evangelical Brotherhood Mission who, after building a bible school six miles (9.7km) outside of Lae, realised they needed a steady flow of income to help fund the school. With their strong connection to Switzerland, which is considered to produce the world’s highest quality of milk, it’s no surprise they decided to start milk production.

The farm has 60 dairy cows, of which 50 are milked twice-a-day – morning and afternoon – yielding up to 300 litres daily. It’s a fairly straightforward process; after the milk has been taken by machine from the cow, it’s transferred to a large cooling tank where it stays overnight. When the milk has reached the optimal 4°C temperature, it’s poured manually through a filter then frozen in liquid nitrogen before being defrosted, the straw is carefully cut and transported in a small tank. Once thawed and passed through a ‘sonicator’ to further reduce bacterial contamination, it’s brought to a small room at the back of the store for packing into plastic containers, then sold for K3.25 for 375ml, K6.25 for one litre or K10 for two litres. The average price for a one-litre-carton of imported UHT milk is between K4.80 and K5.83, depending on the brand.

Farm manager Albert Kish is in charge of the operation; a Christian from a mixed heritage of Chimbu and Jiwaka, Albert has been working at 6 Mile Farm for six years, living on the property with his wife and daughter, and very kindly gave me a tour. Standing among the manicured lawns, well-kept gardens and tidy houses, it’s hard to believe you are so close to Lae town and it’s no wonder Albert has no desire to leave.

From calves to mature animals, Albert has a herd of about 200 head grazing on the 50-hectare farm. The first cows were shipped from Australia but now the farm breeds its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own production. Albert has no desire to leave. The cows have to be in good condition and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own through artificial insemination. Sourcing bull semen from Australia is a far cheaper exercise than buying and importing live stock and it’s not profitable for the farm to own a herd bull. The last breeding program took place in 2010 and the next is planned for 2016. Albert works closely with rice distributor Trukai Industries to source and buy semen; Trukai has its own.
Dairy farming is not the type of farming that people in PNG practise or have the expertise. “It all comes down to a lack of knowledge in the dairy industry,” he says. “It’s all too political; we don’t want to be involved with politics.”

Chocolate milk is the biggest seller, followed closely by regular milk and the farm’s other products of eggs, cream and yoghurt. There are no plans to expand the business, with Albert content to continue trading to a capacity the staff can cope with.

“Our priority is to supply to our local walk-in customers and to the supermarkets and hotels in town. It is not our aim to make more business but to support the church,” he says.

I asked Albert that if demand for fresh milk was so high and there was clearly an opportunity in the PNG market for a dairy farm, then why was nobody else doing it? “It all comes down to a lack of knowledge in the dairy industry,” he told me. “Basically people take on what they know, especially with agriculture. Dairy farming is not the type of farming that people in PNG practise or have practised for generations. Cows were introduced primarily for beef.”

As dairy cattle don’t like the heat, it’s not hard to conclude that Lae’s tropical climate is not ideal for milk production. Higher temperatures reduce the milk yield and slow weight gain in dairy cows.

“Dairy farming is more suitable in the Highlands,” Albert says. “For us, there is a higher cost involved to keep the cows healthy enough to produce a decent amount. We, in fact, need higher volumes to make the operation worthwhile. You also have to be more careful on the health side of things. This is a challenge.”

PNG’s National Agriculture Quarantine and Inspection Authority carry out routine checks and an annual inspection of the farm to ensure it meets the required standards to continue as a commercial operation.

Every day Albert and his team deliver milk, eggs, cream and yoghurt to local supermarkets, hotels, restaurants and smaller trade stores. To make yoghurt, milk is heated to a temperature of 85°C then cooled to around 49°C. Active culture (good bacteria) is added to the cooled milk with a little dry milk powder then placed in a special heater kept at 38°C, where it stays for 7-10 hours. The final stage is to cool the yoghurt to 4°C, ready for packaging. The farm takes advantage of its good connections with Switzerland by sourcing new parts or repairs from its friends there if vital machinery that has been out of repair is needed. Staff have been threatened, as with most companies in PNG, one of the farm’s biggest challenges is security. Despite employing four men to secure the farm at night, it’s not uncommon to lose calves to thieves, find livestock harmed and in some cases, cows slaughtered. Staff have been threatened in the past and their accommodation broken into, not to mention the expense of repairing machinery that has been purposefully damaged.

“They (thieves) use weapons to cause damage to the livestock and the property. This is a big challenge for us,” Albert says. Students come from all over PNG, particularly rural areas, to attend the farm’s bible college, living in dorms. They learn Christian education with the sole purpose of graduating as pastors, ready to return to their own villages to put their learning to use. Lessons are taught in the morning, while in the afternoon each student is required to put their learning to use. Lessons are taught in the morning, while in the afternoon each student is required to put their learning to use.
and packing eggs, tending gardens and general maintenance to cooking and cleaning. “Part of each of our student’s education is to engage in farm duties and learn skills in basic farming. Girls learn how to sew and cook,” Albert says. “They don’t get paid for their duties, it’s all part of their schooling but they do get a monthly allowance and all their housing and food, electricity and water.” Students are allocated sections of the garden where they can grow herbs, vegetables, bananas and other fruit. “We get single men and women, couples, and even families living here,” Albert says. “They can start from age 18, usually after high school but we accept people up to 35-years-old. We also welcome people from other religions, Catholics, Lutherans etc, not just the Evangelical Brotherhood, and they come from all over the country.” The bible college offers a three-year program, which Albert says is cheaper than other institutions. “We have very good dorms and living standards. They are willing to come to school because after they graduate they become pastors. This is what is important to our students.” Christians are also employed to work on the farm from two church feeder schools in the Highlands. These are small village bible schools where students get taught carpentry and basic farming skills as well as religious education. All of the expertise for running the dairy farm comes from overseas. “Fortunately the missionaries are able to advise us on many things,” Albert says. The entire farm is almost 100% self-sufficient, apart from buying local rice and flour. Students and staff eat beef, pork and a small amount of chicken from the farm. Trees on the station are felled and burned for cooking so there is no need for gas or electric ovens.

**6 MILK DAIRY FARM**
- Located 9.7 km (six miles) from the centre of Lae on the Highlands Highway
- The store opens Mon – Fri 7.30am – 5.30pm, Sat 7.30am – 12.30pm.
- A tip is to visit in the morning to avoid disappointment for fresh milk, cream and yoghurt! Also on sale are eggs, live pigs, tilapia, coconuts, calendars, bibles and religious books.
- To request a tour, contact Albert on 7939 2161.

Surrounded by coconut trees, the nuts are also harvested and sold to passersby, including in bulk for 40t each to women who sell them at the market for K1 each. The farm has one working tractor, a small workshop for repairing machinery and its own generator – a necessity as a backup to the unreliable local power supply – while water is pumped from underground into a 9000l tank.

Although Albert and his team don’t offer official food tastings for visitors, it’s worth popping into the store to see where it all happens and to buy products fresh from the farm. Who knows, maybe we’ll all be heading out there for an icecream before too long!

Gemma King

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