

From Physician to Dairy Entrepreneur

The Dairy Venture of Dr. Ramon Unchuan

With his achievements as a geriatrician (doctor whose clients are elderly patients) and quite a lucrative practice in Sweden, Ramon Unchuan Jr., nevertheless chose to come home and nurture another latent profession: that of farmer and dairy entrepreneur. While his parents weren't farmers, they inherited from his maternal grandmother a 30 hectare tract of land in Dakit, Barili, with rich soil and abundant spring water. Here, his family bred horses, dogs and myriad exotic birds such as cockatoos and ostriches.

Further, growing up on fresh carabao's milk acted as a push factor for him to go into dairy. Dr. Unchuan recalls how fresh milk was delivered daily to their residence on Mango Avenue. To be sure that milk was pure, his paternal grandmother checked their milk supply with a lactometer.

In the late 60's he moved to Manila to study at the U.P. College of Medicine and took his internship at the Philippine General Hospital. At that time, the PGH did not accept non-UP interns yet. Thus a UP Intern was forced to go on duty for as long as 52 hours non-stop, to cover the needs of some 1,000 patients. After his duty, he would recharge his energies by taking a break at the Selecta Ice Cream Parlor, which was the closest he could get to the carabao's milk of his boyhood.

After 30 years in Sweden, his first plan was to go into Murrah buffalo (milking carabaos) raising. However, negotiations with various government entities for buffalo stock were not successful, even when he offered to pay for stock COD.

Disappointed, but not discouraged, he purchased dairy stock from the Cebu Federation of Dairy Cooperatives, enough to produce 20 liters of milk a day, which he initially tried to sell in Cebu City.

As he experienced the nitty-gritty of marketing, Dr. Unchuan admits that marketing milk was not as easy in the Philippines as it was in Sweden. Each time he was able to sell a couple of liters to his circle of friends he felt that his friends were actually doing him a favor "utang kabobot-on" which he could not repay.

He tried selling the milk in grocery stores but their negotiations hassled him. Meanwhile, back in the family farm in Dakit, Barili, he found that strangers and other people within the locality would come inside their sprawling compound to buy milk by the liter. This development made him put up the Molave Milk Station, right beside the road to prevent strangers from coming into the compound. The first interested customer, was actually more interested in the gazebo, and asked outright to buy it.

As weeks went by, the milk station became such a hit that milk and other farm products were sold out by 2 p.m. Demand is especially high on Saturdays and Sundays. The kiosk has been in business for the past nine months. An Italian friend and ice cream expert taught him how to develop his own ice cream and the brisk sales especially during the El Niño makes him wish that the El Niño would extend itself. For the doctor, the business was put up with what he calls "blood, sweat and tears".

With the so many customers ranging from travelers, habal-habal (motorcycle-for-hire) drivers, basketball teams and other people within the locality, who either buy fresh milk or ice cream, he debunks the idea that Filipinos are not milk drinkers.

That people don't drink milk may simply be a question of availability. There is however the

need to cultivate a "cheese culture" or a love for cheese, among the Filipinos. Today, Dr. Unchuan has five dairy cows and three murrah buffaloes on the milk line producing almost 730 liters of milk a month or 24 liters of milk a day. If sold at farm gate price, his raw milk alone would earn him an income of P14, 460 per month. Despite the hype on cholesterol, the doctor would still advice the elderly to drink milk. At least one glass of full cream milk a day will increase an elderly person's lifespan by one hour.

While government and other agencies are concerned about pediatric malnutrition, there is such a thing as geriatric malnutrition which is one of the biggest problems within the malnutrition spectrum.

People seem to be so afraid of high cholesterol but "one simply does not die just because one's cholesterol level rises", he said.

The doctor believes in developing new product lines to complement regularly sold items. He cites fast food chains where new products are advertised every now and then along with regularly sold items.

Hence, the Molave Milk Station also sells pork, salted eggs, kabir chicken (whenever available) and decorative ostrich eggs from almost half a dozen ostriches on his farm.

With the all the hype on anti-ageing, the doctor advices those who are on their elderly years to accept aging since it is part of nature. And to those who are young, to live a sound life as much as possible.

He hopes that government can help the dairy industry by more action than lip service. More specifically, he hopes government can implement a tax holiday for 5-years, custom duty free for dairy equipments and livestock.

While Doctor Unchuan has retired from active medical practice, he occasionally conducts free clinics for the locals of Dakit. But with his present line up of activities, where he is now farmer, entrepreneur and occasional veterinarian, one can say that perhaps some doctors do not simply retire; they just attend to other living things.