



FCC Knowledge Podcast – Episode: Cosmetics to cows: Coming home and moving the dairy forward

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Marty Seymour (MS)

Guest: Ashley Brown (AB)

MS: From AgExpert, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadian Producers, real stories, and real good conversations about the business of farming. I'm your host, Marty Seymour.

AB: I can't imagine working as hard for anybody else. And I think that's just a reality in dairy farming. I mean, we do it because we love it, it's in our bones, it's who we are. And same with any farmland, I think it just becomes a part of you.

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MS: On today's show, we're going to be chatting with Ashley Brown from Browndale Farm, proudly putting Paris, Ontario on the map. Ashley's a fourth-generation dairy farmer. Her family has been on the land for nearly a century. Even though she grew up around agriculture, she really didn't get that involved until later in life. Ashley's original career path was in the permanent cosmetics industry. How did she wind up managing the dairy farm? You'll have to stick around to find out. Today's episode is full of great information about new technology, risk mitigation, diversification, and carrying on the family legacy. Lots to learn ahead.

Welcome to the FCC Knowledge Podcast. Today on the show we've got Ashley Brown. Welcome to the show, Ashley.

AB: Thank you.

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MS: Now, our listeners would know, I love to know where people are from. We've got an audience that covers the country, farmers from corner to corner. So, where's home for you?

AB: We live in Paris, Ontario. We are about an hour west of Toronto.

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MS: Now, price of land. You're in some pretty expensive farmland country. What's the price of land out there?

AB: It's actually gone up quite a bit just over the last few years. A few years back it was going for about \$15,000 an acre. Now it's upwards of \$30,000 to \$32,000 an acre.

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MS: Holy moly. So, our western listeners, their mouths are open right now. What's driving the price of land?

AB: Honestly, I think it's the urban sprawl. We've really had a lot of development over the last few years and we're finding a lot of developers are buying up farmland in our area. And I'm no expert in it, but you can just see that that's probably what's happening simply because there's less and less of it, it's becoming more valuable, developers can come in and make it worth more than I guess what we can just farming it for crops.

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MS: So, that tells me where you're living then if you describe your farm, you obviously are pretty close to metropolitan areas. You've got lots of neighbours where you live. How big would Paris be?

AB: We're fortunate. Paris has actually really exploded just in the last couple of years. I honestly couldn't tell you exactly how many homes have come. We used to be maybe 80,000 and I honestly couldn't tell you exactly how many people there are now. That might be something that we should look up after the fact.

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MS: That's a big town, though. That's not a town, that's a city. So, that's obviously ... you can see how it drives the price of land with just the pure growth around that.

AB: Yeah, it's really grown a lot in the last couple of years. And we're just seeing a huge population increase in the last little while.

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MS: Well, I want to hear about your farm. So now, maybe before we get into the actual farm, you wouldn't self describe yourself as a farmer, you're kind of new to the business? But you were in the cosmetic business before, a cosmetic artist?

AB: Yeah. I know, it's a bit of a switch. My family has actually been on this property for almost 100 years. I am a fourth-generation farmer. My grandfather actually started

milking Holstein cows in 1947. They started with, I believe, about 28 cows. And then the operation just continued to grow with my father growing up dairy farming his entire life. We're milking about 80 cows now, and our operation has significantly grown since 1947.

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MS: Ashley comes from a long line of farmers, and you can hear the excitement in her voice as she talks about her career. But this passion seems to be something that she developed later on in life. Growing up, Ashley wasn't necessarily what you would describe as the typical "farmer's daughter", air quotes.

AB: Even though my father actually grew up farming and spent his whole life farming, my entire life farming, I do have two brothers, and we didn't live on the farm. My parents had a home just five minutes from the farm in town. And so, there wasn't really a lot of pressure on me to be involved with the farm growing up. And I'm not sure if it was because I was a female, or just because we didn't live in town, or what that was, but I had pursued other things. So, I had a career in esthetics and doing permanent cosmetics which is basically tattooed makeup, and I was doing that for almost 20 years, and still continuing to do that. But about six or seven years ago, my husband and I came home from the States, we were living there for about 10 years. He's from Texas so he's got all the makings for a good farmer, even though he wasn't farming over there either. But coming home, shortly after we decided to move back to Canada, we found that my dad actually had notice from his workers here that they were going to be having to leave. And my dad was having a hard time finding a replacement for a family that worked for us for four years.

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MS: As many of you listening will already know that good help is certainly hard to find these days. Ashley's dad found himself in a real labour predicament in the twilight of his farming career. So, Ashley and her Texas husband who was now living in Canada, found themselves in a position to get heavily involved in the family farm.

AB: I basically had a discussion with my husband and we both came to the conclusion that we would help my dad out. Even though we didn't know what the heck we were doing, we would learn and do what we needed to do to get him through. And it was supposed to be a temporary situation, just so that he wasn't trying to milk 80 cows by himself, and make feed, and do all the chores. So, we were supposed to be intermittent until we could find some good help. And we had help, it kind of came and went as it does. We're fortunate we've got good help now. But after about maybe four years of doing that, I just fell in love with the cows, and it got to a point where we either needed to expand and change the way that we were doing things. Because I was milking cows in the morning, working my full-time job during the day, and then coming back and helping out milking cows in the afternoons as well, and it was getting to be a little bit too much. So, we decided to make a change and move forward and continue dairy farming. So, what was supposed to be an

act of love to try and help my dad out and learn how to do it all, turned into us continuing with the family legacy. And quite the turn around, yeah.

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MS: I'm still kind of back on the, this was supposed to be interim, and then all of a sudden, we're doubling down and going all in. I can't think of how many young people are listening that could relate to that. So, I can't let that go before we get into the barn and the business.

AB: I think because I never really had the experience of being a part of it, it had me come in it with fresh eyes. And so, it wasn't something I'd always done. I'd never done any of it. I didn't know a thing. I didn't know how to milk a cow until I was 30 years old which sounds terrible if my father's a dairy farmer. But it's just what my situation was growing up. And I had a great childhood. It was wonderful. We came out to play on the farm all the time. But it just wasn't an expectation of me, I think because we had some help, I had two brothers, and my mom didn't grow up farming either, so we just pursued other things. But when it came down to it, I really love the cows. And it was just, I think it was in my bones and in my blood and it was just something that I took to very quickly, and really learned to enjoy it. I think what did it for me was I was exhausted, I was worn out, and I didn't know if I could keep going on, but I didn't want to let it go.

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MS: Ashley was at a bit of a crossroads here as she was still working in permanent cosmetics while learning to manage the family farm. I think lots of you listening can relate to this who have off-farm income, who aspire to be in the farm full time some day. So, she knew she couldn't keep this pace up forever. But she was really falling in love with everything and felt that all too familiar pull to continue the family legacy.

AB: I couldn't see my dad's entire life's work just be gone because I couldn't hack it. So, instead of figuring out that aspect of things, we just found a way that we could make it work. I didn't want to give up my other career that I had built for at that point it had been 16 years. And to be quite honest, financially that was very good for us and it's a little bit lucrative which I'm grateful for. So, I could put in lower hours and yield a pretty decent income and still milk the cows. I think emotionally I was at a place where I couldn't imagine not having a family farm, and I couldn't imagine not having cows. I never thought that I would ever think that way. Growing up, it was just always, dad always had the cows, it is what it is. But it's funny, I think when you're working with them every day you do develop relationships with them. You do get your favourites. You do get to know who they are and they just become a part of your daily life. And just, I couldn't bear the thought of saying goodbye to all the girls. I know that sounds really crazy, but ...

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MS: It's not crazy to a person in the livestock business, in particular dairy, is the attachment. I'm kind of still also back on, what did the Texan say? I kind of like calling him the Texan. It has an endearing term to it.

AB: I know. So, his name is Steve, and he's ... oh, bless his heart. Honestly, looking back at how we met, and our entire story, and where we are now, it was honestly fate and meant to be. We actually met on a blind date while I was on vacation in Arizona. That's a whole other story. But fast forward to, here we are 20 years later. We got married quite young. And he jokes that he doesn't love farming, he loves his wife. But I think that he really does enjoy the working outdoors, the freedom of being the master of your own destiny, I guess, and not having a boss. And it comes with a lot of sacrifice. It comes with a lot of stress and a lot of hard work. But at the end of the day, you only get what you put into it. And I can't imagine working as hard for anybody else, and I think that's just the reality of dairy farming. I mean, we do it because we love it, it's in our bones, it's who we are. And with any farmland, I think it just becomes a part of you. And I think that he's really embraced that as well.

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MS: It sounds like a perfect partnership on many levels.

AB: Yeah, it really is.

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MS: Remember that challenge Ashley was having with biting off more than she could chew and managing two separate careers? The answer might not be what you thought. The answer to her problem was in automation, or robots, if you will.

So, you've got to describe the dairy to us then. Not everybody understands a modern dairy, and we can get into the robotics piece in particular. But so, you expanded the dairy. You're milking 80 cows today with robots?

AB: Yeah. So, what we started with was an older tie-stall barn. It was a beautiful tie-stall barn. It was in great shape. It's just, any tie-stall barn there is a lot of work with it. And so, that was the piece for us is we needed to figure out a way that we could be a little bit more efficient and not so reliant on outside help. And at the end of the day, if it was just my husband and I, we needed to be able to do all of it just the two of us, and not kill ourselves trying to get it done. So, what we'd opted to do was go into what I'm calling a modern dairy facility. So, we have robotic milkers which allows the cows to get milked multiple times a day on their own time. So, they're incentivized with a pellet that comes in. It's like a little treat for them. And they can get milked up to six times a day. So, we actually have more milk coming from less cows. It's allowed us to really have a greater output with less input. We actually invested in a feed pusher as well. So, instead of going along with a shovel and pushing up that feed every two hours, we have a little machine that does it every two hours, and it gets done through the evening as well. So,

the intake of the animals is much greater, so the output of the milk is much greater because they're not running out of feed or pushing it out where they can't reach it.

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MS: You heard it here, folks. With the help of robots, you can literally squeeze more milk out of less cows. It's a really good example of how adopting new tech can increase labour efficiency while improving the profitability of your operation. But I know how daunting adopting new tech is, coming from a guy that can barely get his cell phone turned on some mornings. So, I was curious why and how Ashley decided to take this leap.

AB: I think what it was is it came down to my time. If I was able to redistribute my time in different ways and I would be able to work off farm while still maintaining and managing the farm here as well, then that financially made sense for us. We were very fortunate we came into it at a time when there were some incentives to move into innovation financially as well. With a parlour, we would still have been reliant on either myself doing it three times a day, or us having help. And with my father getting older as well too, and he's still in fantastic shape, but the reality of it is, he's going to be wanting to be wandering around that barn until he's 95 years old. And I wanted him to still be able to be an integral part of that without this physical labour end of it. So, that's really why we decided to go ahead with robots. And they're not perfect. They all have their own ups and downs. But yeah, I think that was the biggest thing that drove it is just being able to have that flexibility and that extra time. And just knowing, honestly, if my husband was sick and my dad was sick, I could still do absolutely everything myself if I had to.

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MS: Clearly, Ashley solved some huge HR labour challenges using tech. I imagine for many of you listening, you can relate to the fear of things falling apart quickly if anyone is unable to show up at work some day. Ashley addressed these production rifts, and in the process, maintained and improved the profitability of her operation. I'm impressed.

So, obviously the investment decision was multi-factorial. The other thing I think I learned in this industry too is, every time I do the math on the cost benefit, I can never make it pencil out where I feel like the decision is clear, or that I know I'm going to make money. I think you did a barn expansion, added robots. How did you get through that?

AB: I think what it was, it was funny, I actually sat down with our bookkeeper, and she kept looking at me, she's like, you can't afford to do this with your numbers. And I just kept looking at her, because the way that it works in Canada with our supply management system is that we purchase our quota, and we fill that quota. But we also have extra incentive days that come up that we're able to fill. So, I sat down, and I pencilled out with her, I said, look, this is the income that I am missing out on because we cannot fill our quota completely in the state that we're at. And we had just gotten to the point where we wanted to simplify and make a better situation for us and our animals. And so, when

we pencilled out the fact that we could have a greater income because we would have the capacity to milk more cows if we needed to, it made sense.

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MS: The last observation by Ashley really drives the point home that sometimes investing in new tech will actually help you capture some of the income you're missing out on. In many ways, for a lot of us it's counterintuitive that we need to spend more money to capture more revenue in a risk-managed fashion. Ashley crunched the numbers, and it became pretty clear that she likely had more to lose by not investing in automation.

AB: I never thought that we would be milking much more with less cows. So, just a little bit of perspective. We're able to fill now, with 80 cows, 106 kg of quota, and we were filling about 90 kg of quota with 90 cows, I believe, in the old facility. And we were having difficulty feeding our cows who were outside properly, our dry cows. We had grown beyond our facility. And so, we were suffering, the cows were suffering, and something needed to be changed. And so, we could have gone parlour, we could have just expanded the tie stall, but I think it was mainly the labour end of things and not wanting to be completely reliant on outside help to be able to accomplish everything.

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MS: You know, for the complexity of the decision and the leap of faith you made, there's actually some simplicity in what you've done here. Because you boil it down to, these are the two or three things that we need to solve. Labour sounds like your first one. Sort of de-risk that so I'm not relying on a family to live with us and do the work. Or you've got the financial side, to me, sometimes that's the easiest. It's just linear, you put the math in, and can we cash flow it. But I love how you approached it.

So far, we've heard all about the benefits of adopting new tech and automation in the dairy world. But after the break, Ashley is going to talk a little bit more about the darker side of the transition and how she got through that. She's also going to talk about how she further diversified her business to find new revenue streams. You're going to want to hear every bit of it. Stay tuned.

AB: In our old tie-stall barn, it was very hard to find labour. Now that we have a robotics milking barn, we're finding it actually easier to find help. Being able to hire out and have someone do some of the chores, I'm able to manage things but take a step into the store location and manage things there a little bit more.

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MS: [FCC.ca/knowledge](https://www.fcc.ca/knowledge). It's a place for ag news, outlooks, and advice, all in one place. If you're looking for information and resources on how to manage risk, increase your profitability, or just help build a strategy, check us out at [FCC.ca/knowledge](https://www.fcc.ca/knowledge). The FCC

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If you look at that transition period where you went from what your family and your grandpa and everybody knew as stanchions and milking cows, to going to robots, that transition is not always easy. If you look back on it, what was the hard part?

AB: First of all, I'd like to say that I am so grateful that I started in that facility. Because not growing up farming, it taught me, well, 1) what I was made of and that I could actually do it but, 2) I don't know that I would have been able to learn as quickly or as well about the animals, and their health, and the things that they needed in the environment that we have now. It was just such a completely hands on, everyday situation with every animal. So, talking about the hardest transition, I think the hardest part was, when we were building the barn, I took on the role of being basically the general contractor and keeping things going, keeping things moving, making sure that they were doing what they needed to do. And so, I think that, plus balancing trying to be working off farm and still milking the cows. And so, I'm really grateful that we had a really great gentleman working for us at that time, so I was able to take a step back from milking. I was still involved in the farm, and I was still milking, but it wasn't every day. And I was able to really focus on getting that building going and pushing things forward in that way.

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MS: During this transition phase, Ashley had to take on even more responsibilities. Thankfully, she was able to find help with the labour side of her business to free up some time so she could focus on the business management. The reality is, there's lots of tough decisions to make when adapting new technology and building new infrastructure. So, what are some of the important things to consider when making these decisions?

AB: It's hard. So many people have so many opinions about how you should set up a new facility enabled in that way. And so, we also needed to find the time to go and look at a lot of different barns, and a lot of different buildings, before we made any final decisions on our layout, and our setup, and what we were going to do. And I think we changed our plans maybe five or six times before we finally ended on the plan that we wanted. We wanted something that felt cozy and felt warm and inviting because we wanted to be able to have the public come through our facility. I think that educating the public is a huge tool for us to help grow our industry, is to bring our community into our space to let them see what farming is actually about, and teach children where their food actually comes from, let them meet the people that are actually creating the food. That was the biggest struggle for us is trying to create a facility that was not only functional, but they would feel inviting and give that right message out to our community as well. Now, the cows, they were amazing. We really thought that they would struggle more going to the robot, but I think we only had maybe two or three that we ended up having to cull through that whole transition. We did really struggle with our feed company. We ended up having to switch though because we were pushing about 20 cows every day, and multiple times a day, and it was just exhausting. And we kept trying to work with our feed company.

They gave us great service, they were wonderful people, we really enjoy the relationship we had with them. But at the end of the day, it's just the feed ration wasn't working, the pellet wasn't working. We did switch our pellet and within about a week we had two instead of twenty cows we were pushing. So, I think that those hurdles were probably the most stressful that we went through. Just the planning period, trying to manage it all while we were getting it done, and then also once we were actually physically in there, not understanding why the cows didn't want to go through the robot. And once we figured all those little quirks out, it's been pretty good.

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MS: So, full disclosure, I used to be that feed guy. In my early 20s, I was one of those on-farm dairy reps, and so I'm kind of interested in this side of it. Maybe my question for you, this is not an uncommon thing for any farmer is a conflict, or maybe a doubt about a supplier. When do you decide that you need to make a change? Because in our industry, relationships run deep. How do you get to the point where it's like, I'm sorry, I just have to make a change?

AB: I think for us there's a couple of things. I was at my wits' end, to be honest. It's just, I was exhausted trying to balance it all between work and farming. And my dad had started to notice that the cows were getting thin. The body condition on them was not as great as it should be. They had started pulling a lot of the energy out of the feed. So, they pulled more corn out of our TMR mix, PMR mix, I guess, now, and try and drive the cows to the robot and it wasn't working. But not only was it not working, but what it was doing is it was creating thin cows, which was causing complications when they were calving in, because they were too thin when they dried off. And it was just, we finally got to the point where they didn't have any answers for us anymore, and they were starting to point fingers for maybe things that we were doing in the barn. And at that point it was just, you know what, we're going to try something new. We just had to switch to a company that had a lot more experience with robotics. And honestly, it's a palate thing for the cows. They just liked the taste of the one over the other. So, we put the energy back into the bunk, cows started feeling a lot better, they were having that body condition back on them. Calving started being easier, not as many complications. So, it was just snowball effect of everything. It's interesting how one small thing can really affect the whole operation on a whole.

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MS: I don't think Ashley anticipated that she would be changing feed suppliers in the middle of building a new barn. Sometimes change is needed in ways you really don't expect when making business transitions. Despite the unpredictability, Ashley pushed through and successfully adapted her business as needed. So, now that the tech is solving the world's ag problems, including Ashley's, how far did she buy in?

So, you double down on tech. You invest in robots, and you've got your bunk pushing. Are you addicted to tech now and does it set you up to say you're going to be an early adopter of the next thing?

AB: Honestly, I don't think so. I think what we did is we chose the tech in the barn that would make sense for efficiency. So, the robotics milking the cows, we're getting more output with less cows and our hours are a little nicer as well. We're not up at 4:30 in the morning anymore, we're up at 7:30. So, that alone was a big deal for us. We're not generally early risers, my husband and I, so that was a very nice change for us. But also, the manure scrapers too, we've got them on only going every two to three hours just to keep the feet clean and things like that. So, I wouldn't necessarily say that we're super techy by any means. But if there's something out there that can make our job done more efficiently and benefit the health and well-being of our animals, then absolutely I'm going to take a look at it.

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MS: There was an interesting guy name, Pancero. He was kind of a guru of sales, and I use this all the time, it applies to so many things in my personal life. But he had five rules of what makes people buy stuff. And there's a couple that are kind of predictable, like improve your competitive advantage, or something that decreases your costs. But the one I love, and is five, is if it makes my work or life easier. And I think we underestimate that in the industry. So, your decision around adopting tech was making your work or life easier. And I don't think we have to be embarrassed of that in our industry anymore.

AB: I think there's a bit of a stigma, and maybe it's because I've come into new at a later age. And I've gotten wrapped up into it too is, I'm so busy, I can't accomplish anything else. We just got to a point where it was like, if we want to do something for the evening, I was literally going on two hours of sleep. And you can't function like that. And so, I think that we get into this habit of feeling like that's normal to be so stressed, and so busy and overworked. When in my mind, if I can invest in equipment that will make our jobs easier and become more efficient, and then we can be more rested, we've got clearer minds, we've got better relationships, and just we can make better, clearer decisions because we're not doing everything out of urgency or exhaustion.

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MS: Yeah, it's such an inspiring story. It's not maybe the most natural pathway that we see in our industry. You and the Texan come home and now, as young adults, you're going to reinvent your careers and jump into the dairy business. Like, you didn't pick an easy one to get into either. But man, do you guys have a good narrative.

AB: And I don't think that we actually chose it, to be completely honest. I really think it chose us. And I know that that sounds so crazy. But a girl from Canada and a guy from Texas meet in Arizona on a blind date, we hit it off, I end up picking up my life, moving down there. Two years later we get married, and a decade later we move back home

here, and then we end up finding my family's farm when neither one of us has ever had anything to do with agriculture at all. So, I just think it's one of those things where when it's meant to be, it's meant to be. And sometimes life just chooses a path for you, and you just jump on it and go for the ride and see where it takes you.

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MS: There's another chapter that we didn't talk about and that is, you're doing some farm-raised beef, and you mentioned earlier about tours, etcetera. Tell us about that, how you've diversified that side of your business.

AB: We talked a little bit earlier about how when we built the facility that we wanted to bring the public into the farm. And we did make things a little bit nicer for that. We thought about having a space so we could maybe hold some meetings, do some tours, things like that. We always talked about maybe having a small farm store. But we really got the push for it in 2019 when me, as an esthetician, I was not allowed to work for eight months. And that was really hard when that was my own personal source of income. So, we weren't taking an income from the farm, I was making money off farm, and that was what paid our personal bills. And so, we pivoted very quickly and I'm grateful for that. We were able to get butchering appointments, and we just started selling beef off the farm when the stores didn't have any. Our local stores here were completely sold out of beef for weeks. And we even had a friend of ours who was a logistics manager for one of the large grocery chains, and he was even after me saying, I'll buy your beef, I'll sell it in the grocery stores. We're a dairy farm. We don't have enough to do that. But we're doing an average of about three animals a month and selling them in the farm store now. So, it's worked out really nicely.

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MS: If you thought adopting automation wasn't adventurous enough, Ashley's farm decided to diversify and expand their profit centres. She really embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of seizing opportunities when they're presented and not backing down from a challenge. Admittedly, it pulls at my heart strings. She also used social media and websites to reach consumers with a lot of great options that helped expand her client base.

AB: We've got a pretty decent following. We're growing our Instagram, and that's how we do most of our advertising is just through social media. We've got a website up and going now, but it's mostly just freezer beef, selling it piece by piece. And I think that's what I've found that people weren't always wanting to buy a quarter cow or half a cow. So, we'll do value boxes every now and again as well, pop-up market days. We've brought in a few other vendors here and there. We're making little jellies and things from the farm from my grandma's rhubarb patch. So, just taking it day by day, nice and slow. But the big thing for us too has been our pepperettes. So, we sell those in a couple markets here in town as well, which is wholesale and to our other farmers markets. And we also have them here at the farm for retail. And so, just trying to balance it all.

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MS: So, you said, heiferettes?

AB: Yeah. We do a lot of charcuterie beef as well. So, we'll do dried pepperettes, dried salamis, things like that as well, just to try and get a more added value product. So, we started branding it just Browndale farm as well, and just trying to take it up a little bit of a notch. It's been really fun. We have actually partnered up with a lot of different mail-out box companies as well. So, they'll do food boxes that people have subscriptions for, and we will include the pepperettes in those. We were doing virtual tours with a local tour guide during COVID as well, which was a lot of fun for the school kids, and I think that got us some exposure as well. And we just developed a lot of relationships with local makers and artisans and markets, and it's just been fun.

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MS: Maybe the question on that is, this might be a hard one to answer but I'm going to ask it anyway. If you looked at the effort for net return on say the farm-raised meat side of your business, or the dairy side, where would you say the most money is captured?

AB: I think the dairy side. I mean, the beef side, it's getting traction, it's doing really well. But the other thing on the dairy side is, talking a little bit about, going back to the labour aspect of things, in our old tie-stall barn it was very hard to find labour. Now that we have a robotic milking barn, we're finding it actually easier to find help. So, being able to hire out and have someone do some of the chores, I'm able to manage things but take a step into the store location and manage things there a little bit more. And so, I don't know how to answer that question, to be completely honest. It's all kind of blended together. Definitely the dairy creates more income for us. We have everything set up in an innovative way so that the work end of it isn't as difficult as it used to be. But we've also got some great people working for us right now that help along with that too. So, we're still in the building stages of the store, so maybe check back with me in a couple years, and if things are kind of slowing a little bit more smoothly, and we have a larger customer base, I might not have to be working so hard every day to push it and get the word out there, then maybe they would be level. I don't know.

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MS: I love your ambition. So, this is a selfless plug you can do for anybody that's looking for farm-raised beef. All you've got to do is get to Paris, Ontario.

AB: Yeah, absolutely. We can actually ship any of our dried products through all of Ontario as well.

0:33:34.1

MS: If you want to find out more about Browndale farm, Ashley's just one click away at BrowndaleFarm.com. It's got really good info there on what they're selling, her facilities, and some of the events and tours they're doing. Do her a favour and check it out. And even more importantly, if you're ever in Paris, Ontario be sure to look them up.

So, I'm kind of wrapping up with another standard set of questions I love to ask, the first of which is, if you look back on all of this, what advice would you give your younger self?

AB: That's a hard one. I'm thinking. Maybe just breathe, to be honest. Just breathe. Because I think when you're in the crux of it and you feel like you're drowning, it's hard to see the end of it. It's hard to see where you're going to come out on top. And I think it's important to just take a breath and make sure that your goals are clear, and that you have a direction, and that you're making efforts to work in that direction. And if it takes a little longer than what you hoped for, that that's okay, because you're still going to get there. So, just live in the moment, enjoy the time that you have where you have it, and know that if you feel like you're drowning that you're going to catch your breath soon.

0:34:48.6

MS: Boy, that's good advice for anybody from any discipline. That's just solid, solid advice.

AB: Yeah, taking that breath and having a good support system was invaluable.

0:34:59.3

MS: What a good reminder for us. And so, lastly, what are you most proud of, Ashley? You guys have obviously achieved a lot in a short amount of time. What's your biggest sense of pride?

AB: Honestly, I think that the farm is still going, simple as that. Doesn't matter how big or how small it is. And that we're still working together as a family, and that we all get along. I just hear so many stories of there being tension. And I think I'm most proud of the fact that we all treat each other with respect and kindness, and we all have a voice. And that makes for a really great working relationship, especially when you're talking about family.

0:35:38.1

MS: Oh wow. I give you the last word with that. Thanks for joining me today.

Ashley's story is probably one of the most unique agricultural journeys that I've had a chance to meet on this podcast. She went from having no real involvement in agriculture beyond her family connections, to diving headfirst into this thrilling, cutting-edge dairy operation. She also overcame some incredible human resource challenges along the way,

and really took the lead in driving the farm forward in technology adoption. There's so much to learn from someone like Ashley, so here's a few takeaways that I gathered today. 1) Technology can help improve overall efficiency and profitability. I think most of us really know that, but automation really helped drive Ashley's dairy forward. The fact that she was able to produce more milk from less cows speaks to the efficiency itself. And the recipe inside of her model in dairy that's kind of under-celebrated is her ability to capture data to do that. Capturing that information allowed her to measure the increased productivity coming from the robots, and how they managed the cows under this new model. She also found great ways to find labour efficiency and take the burden off her family so that she could reduce the production risks and the labour challenge. So, increasing output with less labour translates into more time for Ashley to focus on running her business, ultimately making her more money. 2) When planning for a large change to your farming operation, you've got to carefully look at all the angles. The decision to automate was a complex one that required a certain leap of faith, but a lot of preparation for the adaptation. Ashley analyzed the cost of production in her financials to see if they could really cash flow the automation and made some significant changes to her feed supplier along the way. But she didn't do all this by accident. She carefully weighed out and considered all the options. She accomplished all of this while keeping in mind her family's intentions with their cows. 3) might be my favourite. Innovation through technology adoption is a strategy that can also contribute to diversification. So, since adopting the automation in the barn, Ashley has been able to free up her time to rise above the day-to-day grind of milking cows to look at the business holistically. Before long, they have a meat business driving people to the farm with an active social media platform and a website, and a diversified revenue stream. It took the technology to help free up the time to look at the business through a more open-minded expanded lens. And point 4) is kind of about inspiration. Don't be afraid to try something new. Ashley's story is full of milestones and accomplishments, but it's pretty inspiring when you think of somebody that came out of the cosmetics industry, back to the family farm, and went all in to build a career milking cows, transitioning to automation, and coming up with a robust diversified business model. Don't be afraid to try something new.

Well, that's it for today. I hope you enjoyed meeting Ashley today as much as I did. The future of dairy farming looks bright with progressive people like Ashley. If you like what you heard today, follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts. We have all our past episodes available there. Thanks again and we'll see you next time.

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