

# Cows Are Allowed to Develop

## Judge Guido Simon Farming Organically with Jerseys and Polled Holsteins

An article by Ivonne Stienezen originally published  
in the November 2015 issue of Veeteelt magazine  
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German organic dairy farmer and judge Guido Simon has his own philosophy of breeding. His herd is already two thirds polled and he regularly uses older sires. He also has a fondness for the Jersey breed.

Dairy farmer Guido Simon, 45, makes his rounds through the pasture in Sudern, Germany. "Grazing is very important to me as organic farmer," Simon states. "All animals graze on my farm, even the youngest calves." Simon milks 80 cows using a 7-year-old milking robot. Cows who do not need to be milked can leave the 1978 free stall barn through a selection gate. Cows who need to be milked go to the robot first, then they are free to go outside.

Back in the pasture, Simon is looking for his favorite cow, Katharina (Fyn Lemvig), an Excellent Jersey who is now pregnant with her 13<sup>th</sup> calf. "I saw her at a show in Hamm in 2005. There was only one class of Jersey cows at the show. I saw her walking, led by a 6-year-old girl. I had seen Jerseys before but I completely felt in love with this cow. I heard someone beside me say that the breeder might be willing to sell her. I approached the breeder and before she left the show ring, she was mine." He smiles and adds, "It made a difference that she did not win the class. That is why I could buy her for a good price."

Simon continues, "Katharina is the kind of cow I really like to have. She has enough capacity and rib to enable her to eat a lot of grass." Katharina demonstrates her love for grazing as she poses for a photo, undistracted. " Jerseys are really strong animals," says Simon as he explains how Katharina was injured 8 years ago. "You could see the bone. A Holstein would not have survived it. Katherina only has a thick rear leg left from it." Katherina is not milked by the milking robot. "Because Jerseys have shorter legs, there is not enough room between the floor and her teats, so I milk her in a different way. The other Jerseys go to the robot quite willingly, they are smart animals who know the robot allows them to be milked frequently. But with young animals it is sometimes challenging. They have too much room to move around and that makes it difficult for the robot to attach the milker," Simon says. "The Jerseys do well on the farm with the Holsteins. They are really aggressive, they can get a Holstein out of the pellet box pretty easily. They also have a nice character to work with and are easy to handle. But I only want a maximum of ten Jerseys in my herd, and that is mainly because of the robot."

### Unconventional Breeding

The breeding philosophy of Simon, who judged the CRV Cow Expo in 2013 and the NRM (national show) in 2008, can easily be called unconventional, not only because of the high proportion of polled animals on the farm – two thirds are polled – or because he breeds Jerseys in addition to his Holstein herd, but also because of his bull choices. aAa<sup>®</sup> is an important part of that, which is not surprising considering Simon was an aAa<sup>®</sup> approved analyzer for 10 years. Simon likes to use bulls who have proven they are good, sometimes older bulls who were born as long ago as the 1970s. "Every year I use really old bulls on 5 or 10 cows. I have a daughter of Chito, a bull born in 1977, who is polled. I think that is pretty unique." Simon used semen from polled bulls for the first time in 1988 because he saw it would be important for the future. "I used 10 doses of the heterozygous red factor bull Polled Plus. There were 3 daughters born on the farm, one of them became a bull mother and is in the bloodline of many cows who are on the farm today."

## **Two Thirds Polled**

Of the 150 animals of all ages on the farm, 100 are polled. Almost all the young stock is polled, but some of the milking cows have horns. "I do not sell an animal because she has horns. When calves have horns I look at the pedigree. I do not sell the calves with horns from very good cows, the others I do. I have sold calves from very good cows in the past because they were not polled, but I regret that. When a calf is born I check first to see if it is polled, then I check to see if it is male or female." Simon has to dehorn about 5 calves per year. Organic farms in Germany have to show that they try to avoiding dehorning. "I was already into polled breeding, but because of this rule, I focused on it completely." Simon is convinced that dehorning will soon be forbidden in Germany, first for organic farms and later for conventional farms.

## **Let Cows Develop**

"I think it is sad that cows do not have the opportunity to develop anymore. These qualities are lost in the current breeding philosophy. Nowadays heifers already give a lot of milk, for me that is not necessary at all," Simon states. He likes it better when a cow starts with a production of 6,000 - 7000 kg and develops into a cow who is able to produce 10,000 kg. "That is why I try to breed animals who have the ability to develop. I am patient with heifers, I give them a chance to become good cows." Simon shows an example of the kind of cow he likes to see. "This Perfect daughter, Cowgirl, is not a show cow, and her breeding values say she is also not a good producer. But she produces almost 15,000 kg of milk per year." A little distance away walks a Shottle daughter, Iridium, who is Simon's show cow. "This is not the kind of cow I like to have on my farm, I think she is too narrow. But I know she will do well at shows. There is a difference in how we judge, between what we think is pretty and what is good on the farm," Simon says. As a judge, he is involved in a work group which pursues harmonization. "We have already achieved a lot. Cows who win at the shows already look more like the cows we need to have in the barns. That is different than 20 years ago. Those cows were too extreme."

## **No Compromises**

Simon is increasingly convinced that choosing the right bull for the cow is the most important aspect of breeding. He made compromises in the past in order to have as many polled animals as possible. "I used many polled bulls who did not fit so well on certain cows. Because of that, I now have 100 polled animals, but I also have too many cows who are not put together well enough." Simon prefers to use bulls with high reliability. He finds breeding cows is the most enjoyable part of his day. "I lock the cow, look at her and think about the calves she has had. I look at the papers and which aAa® numbers she needs. Then I go to my two semen tanks. I like to collect semen." Simon has semen from 150 bulls from all over the world. A few Holstein bulls in his collection are Chito, Ramos, Oman, Jeeves, Shottle, Elevation, and Mr. Sam. "In the semen tanks, I look at which bull I should pick. At that moment, I feel myself to be a real breeder. That is the moment you can make a difference."

## **Consciously Organic**

Simon made the conscious decision to become organic because he feels food should be produced with as few chemicals as possible. In these times of low milk prices, he is extra pleased to be organic. "Five years ago our milk price was close to the regular milk price and my neighbor laughed at me. Today he is not laughing anymore." Since Simon's farm became organic, production has dropped to 8,000 - 8,500 kg per cow with 3.9 - 4.0 % fat and 3.4 - 3.5% protein. "I try to find the optimal production per cow. An average of 10,000 kg per cow annually would not work in this system with robots and grazing."