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Treating Sick Animals and Many a Sweet Tooth

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by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

It was an ominous Christmas gift, delightfully ominous. When **Janet B. Mitchell, V'90**, encountered the gorgeous Jersey calf, bedecked in a big red bow, on Christmas morning ten years ago, she had no idea this animal meant business: the ice cream business.

The calf, a gift from Mitchell's husband, Jim, signaled the re-launch of the defunct dairy operation at the 200-year-old Mitchell family farm. And it meant a delectable career offshoot for veterinarian Janet, who oversees the farm's ice cream operation.

When she's not practicing small-animal medicine full-time, Mitchell is busy hiring and scheduling retail staff, running the register, keeping the books, and concocting new ice cream flavors for the store, which operates April through October on the Hockessin, Del., farm where the Mitchells have lived since they wed in 1988.

Woodside Farm had ceased its dairy operation in 1961 in favor of producing various crops, eggs, poultry, beef, sheep, flowers, and pumpkins. A seventh-generation Mitchell to work the farm, Jim decided to resume the dairy operation in the mid-1990s. Although Woodside ships milk to a major dairy co-op ten months a year, Jim knew that a marketable product other than milk would be key to keeping the farm afloat.

Woodside was in good company, says Janet, who notes that a number of small dairies like theirs augment their bottom line by retailing milk-made products.

"More and more of the smaller dairy farmers are realizing that to stay in the dairy business, they'll have to direct-market a product," Janet explains.

After a lackluster stint with cheese, Jim contracted with another dairy to convert Woodside's milk into a base for ice cream. By 1998, Woodside Farm Creamery began offering some 30 flavors of ice cream, sold from an old wagon shed they converted into a store and walk-up stand.

The bucolic charm of the 75-acre spread

produces a popular backdrop for eating ice cream, says Janet, who estimates that Woodside served about 100,000 customers last year. "Our area has become very developed," she reasons. "So people think they are going out to the country when they come out to us."

Born in a small town just southwest of Richmond, Va., Janet had no ice cream ambitions as a child, save for maybe eating it. While growing up in the Mid-Atlantic states, she had various pets and, by about the age of 10, her veterinary quest had crystallized. But she viewed it as a largely outlandish wish. The turning point came at her Clemson University freshman orientation, when a friend's father stoked her dreams by telling her, "If this is what you really want to do, then work hard and do it."



Only three years into her bachelor's degree in zoology, Janet began veterinary school. By the age of 25, she had her V.M.D. degree, and went to work in lab animal medicine at nearby DuPont Merck Pharmaceutical Company.

Small-animal practice soon followed and, shortly after Jim decided to reintegrate dairy cows on the farm, Janet began to appreciate the difference—in terms of time commitment—between being a practice owner and an associate. "If I owned my own practice, I couldn't do [the creamery]," she says.

Late in the third season of operations, Janet took over management of the store from the supervisor they had hired to help them launch it. And she moved to her current practice, Hockessin Animal Hospital, which is just five minutes from home.

But being a business owner has given her a fresh perspective on some of the daily concerns of the practice owners for whom she has worked. "I definitely appreciate now why they were so particular about supplies and suture, and how it can affect the bottom line," says Janet, who is the current president of the Delaware Veterinary Medical Association.

Mitchell, 38, says veterinary practice has proved an excellent training ground for running an ice cream enterprise, particularly where staff-management issues are concerned. In the

ice cream shop, she has integrated elements of the varied management styles she has encountered over the years, in both industry and private practice.

And she is realistic about her staff's limitations. Her ice cream, she says, is sold by weight not only to tailor the portion size to the customer but also because, "It's hard to get 20 teenagers to scoop the same size cone."

In addition to store sales, the creamery supplies several local restaurants and gourmet shops, and stations an ice cream trailer at local special events like the Mushroom Festival in Kennett Square, Pa. Janet also donates ice cream to fundraisers for the local Rotary Club, of which she is an active member.

While cookie dough and vanilla win Woodside's popularity contest, the Mitchells regularly develop feature flavors—like pumpkin in the fall—and custom flavors for special events like Winterthur's recent 50th anniversary celebration. Woodside's "Peanut Butter & Jelly" ice cream was named the best kids' flavor at the 2003 National Ice Cream Retailers Association Annual Meeting.

At 15–16 percent butterfat, (10–12 percent is typical), Woodside's ice cream is on par with high-end, creamier brands like Ben and Jerry's and Häagen-Dazs. Two farm employees mix the ice cream base with flavors to produce a concoction that prompted Jim—when he appeared on the Food Network a few years ago—to quip: "This ice cream is so fresh it was grass a few days ago."

Woodside's 30 milking cows give Janet the occasional opportunity to bring her veterinary skills to the farm. While New Bolton Center provides veterinary services to Woodside, Janet is the first line of fire for health issues in the herd. And she treats routine bovine ailments like mild lacerations, uncomplicated dystocias, and milk fever.

When she joined Hockessin Animal Hospital a few years ago, her new employer—capitalizing on Woodside's popularity in the community—placed an ad announcing the arrival of "Dr. Janet Mitchell of The Creamery at Woodside Farm."

After all, she is, as her veterinary clients often call her, the "ice cream doctor."

For more information on Woodside Farm Creamery, visit www.woodsidefarmcreamery.com.