Parlour technology simplifies decisions
compiled by Liza Bohlmann

What sets the different milking systems apart in terms of operation is whether it is simple to use, modern by design, upgradable and suited to electronic herd management programmes. To complement the hardware, you need outstanding software to back it up.

There are a few very good automatic herd management systems on the market, including those such as Alpro from the DeLaval stable and DairyManagement System 21 from GEA Farming Technologies.

Andries and Elsabé Badenhorst, Jersey farmers from Bredasdorp, recently upgraded to an Alpro system. “It suits our needs, as we have a seasonal calving system on the farm and are more interested in the kind of parlour management software DeLaval offers.”

Tigger Bryden farms near Kokstad and chose the Afimilk parlour management system: “We know exactly what the cows’ daily production is and can address any variation immediately. Sorting cows in groups is so easy and more accurate, while sorting individual cows from the platform is incredibly valuable, particularly when working with sick cows. With the Afimilk system, all this is done automatically.”

Besides choosing a management system that suits your needs (and pocket), it is important to install the right type of parlour for your labour force, herd size and the amount of time you can afford to supervise and manage the milking team.

“Herringbone systems are labour efficient: one operator can handle up to 10 milking points with ease and, depending on the design, the ergonomics of the operator can be taken into account, making it easy to handle the milking of lots of cows before fatigue sets in,” writes Murray Versfeld, managing director of Waikato South Africa.

“If the system is automated with cluster removers, it makes it even easier and less attention needs to be paid to over milking cows. If feeding is automated, it makes the operator’s job that much easier and the cows are fed accurately all the time.”

A rotary parlour is very different, because it determines the speed with which the milking routine takes place and the operators’ tasks are focused.

“This allows you to train a person to do only one task at a given position and you have much more control as to who is doing what,” Versfeld explains.
Individual management of each cow is made possible with modern technology.
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Contact: Murray Versfeld
Mobile: +27 82 567 7234
Fax: +27 414 844 509
Email: murray@waikato.co.za

Denise - Office ph: +27 414 841 383
Email: pe@waikato.co.za

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“The level of parlour stress is much reduced in a rotary system. Each cow has her individual bale (standing place), she can’t be bullied and she gets to eat in peace.

“This is a huge breakthrough and cannot be achieved in herringbone systems. Rotaries also use the benefit of oxytocin more efficiently. The cow is stimulated and left for a minute and then the cluster can be attached, maximising on natural letdown,” says Versfeld.

When opting to feed during milking it is cost effective to have one dispenser per feed stuff. With the help of electronically controlled feeding systems, liquids and minerals can be added to the ration on an individual basis. With these possibilities it is possible to feed cheaper concentrates to late lactation cows and a dry cow meal for steaming up cows.

“The farmer sees each cow individually and has more time to deal with a steady stream of cows and not batches of up to 40 at a time. It is all about attention to detail. The fact that the farmers now love going to the parlour means they see more and pay attention to detail. This in itself is worth between one to two litres of milk per cow,” says Versfeld.

Farmer’s point of view

Alfie Louw, a Jersey pasture farmer from George, milks 300 cows through a 2 x 12 static line herringbone system: “I am very glad I installed the whole system, as the individual cow feeding is what makes the system pay for itself. Afimilk feeds the cows according to their body condition score (BCS) and weight at calving, as well as feeding to production throughout their lactation.

“If she calves at a low BCS, the system feeds her extra at the beginning of lactation until she reaches her ideal weight and automatically puts her back on normal feeding. The benefits of feeding to BCS as well as production are enormous: cows that calve in good condition produce better, conceive more easily and stay healthier.”

Conrad Dreyer milks over 1 500 cows through a 60-point rotary in the Oyster Bay area near Humansdorp: “A computerised ID system is absolutely essential if you want to manage big herds efficiently. The individual cow feeding in particular is where the money is made from a system like Afimilk. We have cows producing 14 litres a day standing next to cows producing 40 litres, and they cannot receive the same amount of concentrate. Enabling my high producers to get the extra concentrate they need means that I keep my best cows in the herd for longer. Our SCC is currently at 160 000 and we can attribute this to the system’s ability to indicate problem cows quickly and effectively.”

“Almost every aspect of our herd management has improved”

Garth Hume milks 450 cows on pastures through a swing-over parlour just outside Riversdale.

“Almost every aspect of our herd management has improved since the installation of our computerised ‘Afi’ system.

Our heat detection rates have been much higher with the use of the pedometers that tell us when a cow is in heat based on increased activity, and this has meant that our 100-day in calf rate has improved a lot. We also save ourselves a lot of time with tools such as the vet visit, which prints our vet list at the click of a button and sorts the cows at the right time when the vet is coming. Now that we are used to having an Afi system, we could not imagine managing our herd without one.”

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