

FARM FEATURE AUSTRIA



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CAP reform has farmers across the UK examining the impact on their businesses, but what about the rest of Europe? Rachel Lovell meets some Austrian hill farmers who are responding to the changing politics with innovation and optimism.

Adapting to change in Austria

Austria is not a headline-grabbing region when it comes to farming, but there is a quiet movement gathering momentum.

About 70 per cent of its land is classed as 'mountainous' due to its iconic alpine hills, so it is not surprising two-thirds of farms qualify for the EU's Less Favoured Areas Support

Scheme (to be replaced by Areas Facing Natural Constraints under the 2015 CAP reform).

The farms are typically small and family-run, averaging 19 hectares (47 acres),

compared to 40ha (99 acres) in Germany and 57ha (141 acres) in the UK.

Largest sector

Dairy farming is the largest

sector in the country at just over 18 per cent of agricultural output, which is logical given the limited agricultural uses to which the foothills can be put to, and their unsuitability for

intensive production methods.

But today's Austrian hill farmers are not letting geography limit their chances of success; and it is young farmers who are leading the way.

Case study: Taschl Farm

A typical example is Taschl Farm, established in 1989 by Andrea and Franz Taschl (both in their mid-40s), 55 miles west of Vienna.

Organic from the beginning, the holding is made up of 24ha (59 acres) of permanent pasture and 28ha (69 acres) of forest, located at an altitude of 600 metres (1,970ft) in the alpine foothills.

Here they produce 80,000 litres of milk a year from 17 Fleckvieh dairy cows, sharing an additional run of alpine pasture with a co-operative of eight neighbouring farmers.



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FRANZ TASCHL

Franz says: "The biggest challenge for us is getting the income we need from the marginal land we have. We cannot be intensive farmers and do not wish to be either - it would not suit our land or the way we want to use it, so we have to be clever with how we use what we have."

Several years ago, financial pressure led to the family diversifying the business, and today a third of their milk is used in the production of 1,200kg of fresh, rinded and smoked cheeses.

The different varieties sell for €10-€14/kg (£8-£11/kg) which generates a third of the farm's income through word-of-mouth and local deli counter sales. The remainder of the milk produced goes into an Austrian milk co-operative called NOEM, whose 4,000 members produce 340 million kilos of raw milk annually.

Young farmers

Austria stands out among other European countries as it has the highest proportion of young farmers, at 10.7 per cent (the EU average is 7.5 per cent). It also has the highest number of organic farms at 20 per cent of holdings, compared to 3.5 per

10.7%

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cent in the UK and about 9 per cent in Italy. These figures play out neatly with the Taschl's situation.

The couple have six children aged between eight and 27 years, with the eldest son, Stefan, working full-time at the holding, and the rest of the children keen to follow in his footsteps.

After studying agriculture in Austria, he trained on a dairy farm in Ireland before returning to the family farm. Here he manages the herd and the milking, while Franz looks after cheese production.

Stefan says: "For me the arrangement works well, as I get to try doing things my own way now, or test out new techniques, and learn from my own mistakes."

"Before, my father would have something to say about the way I do things, but now we work very well together, in charge of separate parts of the business."

Stefan's involvement in the farm has seen the introduction of a solar-powered hay dryer and photovoltaic energy production for domestic use, with the surplus being sold to provide an additional income.

Meanwhile, the forest on the land is managed to produce wood



Andrea (left) and Franz Taschl (right) with son Stefan (centre) run a dairy farm in the alpine foothills.

for building and energy production and more recently they have introduced a crop of a regional speciality, the Dirndl berry.

This unusual diversification came about when struggling hill farmers in the region grouped together to come up with a crop which would grow well in the specific geography and climate of the alpine foothills.

Long forgotten

This tart, rosehip-like fruit was native to the area but had been long forgotten. It makes distinct and flavourful juice, jam and brandy, and with support from EU funds and the Austrian Leader programme, it has become a tourist selling point for the region, which is now known as Dirndl Valley.

All of this adds up to a



A third of the farm's milk is used in the production of cheese.

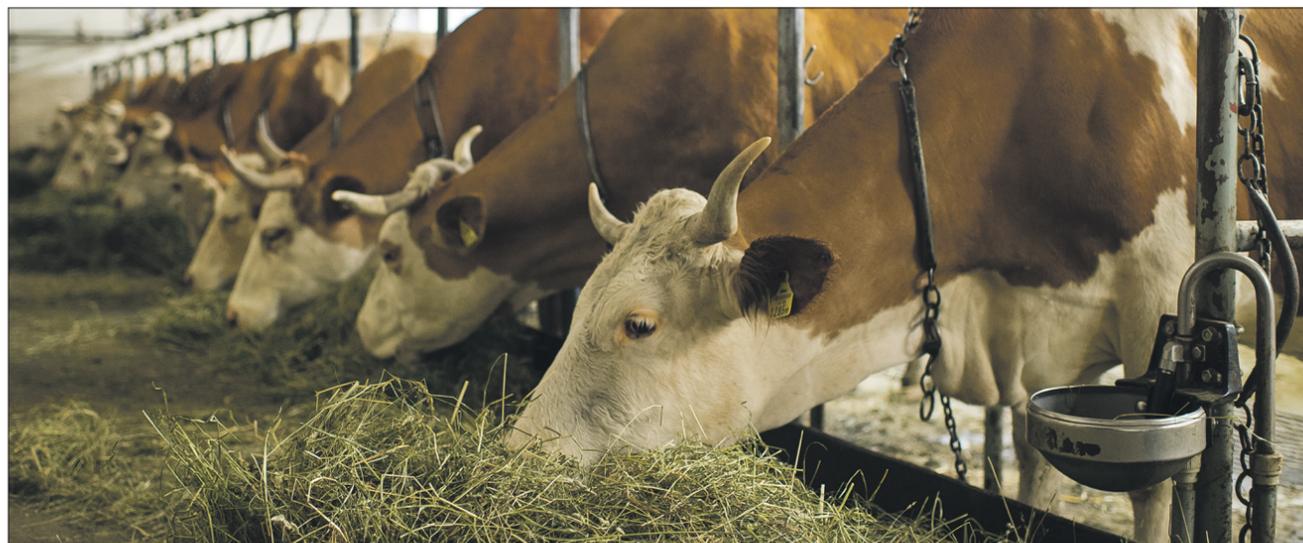
progressive and productive farm, but there is one area where the Taschl family prefer to be backward; their 1958 Steyr tractor.

Franz says: "Modern tractors are so expensive to buy and

when they break, you cannot fix them as they are run by computers and not mechanics. I prefer it this way - I know my tractor like an old friend, I have no debts at the bank, and I can fix it myself."



The Taschl family's 1958 Steyr tractor. PICTURES: Michael Gruber



The 17 Fleckvieh dairy cows which are managed by Stefan Taschl produce 80,000 litres of milk per year for the family.