Cotswold Seeds Ltd
The Cotswold Business Village
Moreton in Marsh,
Gloucestershire GL56 0JQ

First Hand Case Study: Fast and Vast for Silage with Peter Cheek



Peter Cheek is Farm Manager at Godminster Farm, on the outskirts of Bruton in Somerset. The farm is owned by Richard Hollingsworth and milk is sold to make the well-known Wyke Cheddar, the largest independent cheesemaker in the country. The special Godminster Vintage Brand was established over 20 years ago.
The system consists of 300 dairy cows, with the breeding based on a 3 way cross including Scandianvian Red, British Fresian and Fleckvieh or Normande genetics. Around fifty per cent of the milk produced goes into the liquid market. There are 150 autumn calvers and 150 spring calvers on the farm.

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The rotation is based around mixed cropping, usually starting with a winter wheat or winter oat crop. Oats are an important crop at Godminster and are usually sent to White's in Ireland for milling.Once the cereal is harvested, an over-winter cover crop is sown behind the combine to protect and enhance the soil. In the spring a whole-crop mix of pea and barley is drilled for the clamp, undersown with a grass and clover grazing ley.

After 4 years the ley is ploughed in to make way for the arable side of the rotation, usually sown the following spring with a spring crop consisting of wheat, barley or oats.

In terms of feeding the cows, Peter describes the Fast and Vast mix of vetch, red or white clover, crimson clover and Italian ryegrass as 'our most versatile crop,' giving a range of options. 'We need high quality silage and plenty of it, so the Fast and Vast is great,' says Peter. 'Even after the dry summer of 2018 it produced excellent silage, topping ten tons per acre.' It also provides aftermath grazing later in the season or later cuts, which may be slightly lower quality can be taken for dry cow silage.

The Fast and Vast gives a big first cut during the first week of May that helps fill the clamps to start with and it's then cut every six weeks. 'We try to get 4 cuts,' says Peter. After the last cut in the autumn, cultivation work begins to get ready for an entry into a winter cereal in September. 'We use minimal cultivation, the ground is disced over several times then drilled with a Vaderstad and rolled.'

Recently, diverse Herbal Leys have caught Peter's imagination, due to 'their ability to mine minerals, improve drought resilience and improve soil condition as well as feeding the cows.' He is working with Innovative Farmers and experimenting with the grazing management. 'We are still learning how to best use it in our rotational paddock grazing system.'

The cows are allowed to graze for thirty-three days before being moved on, with an ongoing farm trial looking at the impact of grazing each paddock for 2 or 3 days at a time, to work out the most reliable way to keep as many herbs and legumes in the sward as possible.

The farm converted to organic in 1999 and 20 years later has created a successful cheese brand, both under Wyke Cheddar and Godminster Vintage cheese.

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