

# Whisper it but a walk on the wild side is therapeutic

◆ A new farm tour in Argyll allows you to get up close and tranquil with beautiful Highland cattle. Gaby Soutar finds out that it is all very relaxing and informative

It's understood that spending time in nature can improve your mental health. But how about hanging out with Highland coos? The team at Achinreir Farm in Argyll and recently refurbished hotel and restaurant The Pierhouse, where they serve the farm's Highland Fold natural and sustainably-made ice-cream, think it's even more therapeutic. Thus, they've launched a Whispering Highland Cow wellbeing experience for hotel residents. Farmer, Jane Isaacson, tells us more.

#### How did you come up with the idea?

We had a phone call from a lovely family who were on holiday locally; the two teenage daughters were desperate to see some Highland cows and their mum was a keen photographer. We agreed to give them a wee walk around the farm as a favour. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon with a light breeze. I took the guests around the farm to see the different groups of cows. Late afternoon is always a quiet lazy time, it seems to be when they take a wee nap before the evening forage, feed and groom.

We walked quietly down through the fields, stopping first to see the milk cows and their calves and chatted about the ice cream milking regime. The cows

had found a cool spot at the edge of the woodland, and were lying sleepily out of the sun. We were able to creep close without disturbing them.

Carrying on into the next field, we met the calving cows and two yearling heifers who were learning some manners and staying safe from the bull. They were under the big oak tree, chewing the cud, and didn't mind our presence.

Finally we walked to our top pasture where the youngsters were with beautiful Jock the bull. Two three-year-old heifers and a four-year-old cow – all standing serenely in the burn, cooling their feet and chewing contentedly.

As we walked up the burn-side, a red squirrel popped up one of the Douglas firs, then disappeared. When we looked up, three native ponies appeared, so we chatted to them for a wee while.

The hour long walk was so tranquil, our guests absolutely loved it and so did I. We hadn't realised how interested people would be in learning about what we do. At that point we decided that we should offer this experience.

#### Do the cows enjoy being around people?

As with any animals, some are inquisitive (especially the younger cattle) and others can be a bit nervous.



Cow's 'emotions' don't really extend to 'enjoyment'. Ours is an authentic working farm and we don't want it to be presented as theme parky.

#### Do your herd have distinct personalities?

They do. For example, Daisy, who is our oldest cow, is very quiet and well behaved in the milking shed but can't really be bothered with people, whereas Banarach quite likes a scratch after milking, and she's very quiet and gentle. They are all a bit nervous of strangers.

#### Is it difficult to milk by hand?

People are surprised that we milk our Highland cows, because they thought they were a beef breed. I suppose those who're breeding Highland cattle today do so for the meat because their milk yield is too small. However, in the old days Highlanders had three jobs – they were used for ploughing and pulling, they were milked, and produced beef. There's an unusually high butterfat content in their milk, so it's very rich and creamy. I learned to hand milk when I was about 10 years old so I don't find it difficult, although training young milk cows can have its challenges. Learning to milk is much more than the actual technique – it requires a knowledge and familiarity with the animals.

We only milk three or four at a time, and we use a calf-at-foot system – we milk two quarters once a day to get enough for the ice cream. It's a peaceful, mindful task to start off the day. We did buy a small milking machine at the beginning but we can hand milk into a bucket, strain and store it in less time and with much less hassle.

#### When did you fall in love with them?

I was brought up with Welsh Black

Highland cows at Achinreir Farm, main; farmer Jane Isaacson with The Pierhouse's chef Michael Leathley, above; Leathley, below



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cattle and only started with Highlanders in 2016 having read about the high butterfat content and the produce the women used to make in the shielings. I thought it would be interesting to try making some Highlander ice cream, so I borrowed milk from my neighbour who breeds them – it was so delicious and fresh that I decided to find out what was involved in running an ice-cream business. We spent two years building the fold, training them for milking, creating a production unit and a vending trailer and trying out recipes and in August 2017 we launched Highland Fold at our local agricultural show selling Pure Highland ice cream. I am very taken with the breed, they are so nice to work with and incredibly resilient.

#### Any new varieties of ice-cream?

We're thinking about trees, as we have a lot of them. In the autumn some of the children in our community collected acorns and we made acorn ice cream. We're now getting organised for harvesting some birch sap and plan to experiment with birch-flavoured gelato and sorbet. We're also working on a recipe for pine sugar to create pine ice cream.

We've just launched Highland Fold Social Scoop to spread the word about four community events. These include a Planting Pot-luck Picnic in the spring to plant fruit, herbs and edible flowers, a Flower Foraging Fun day in the summer to make foraged flower sugar, and The Oak Folk Festival in autumn.

Overnight stay at The Pierhouse starts from £150 per room per night in March, then £200 until end October, [www.pierhousehotel.co.uk](http://www.pierhousehotel.co.uk), [www.highland-fold.co.uk](http://www.highland-fold.co.uk), Whispering Highland Cow Experience, £15.