

A FAMILY TRADITION Licon Dairy Offers Cheese, Relaxation

By Maria Cortes Gonzalez
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There's more to enjoy at the family-run Licon Dairy in San Elizario than popping a paper-thin patty of *asadero* cheese into your mouth. And it's easy to tell by the steady stream of customers that many El Pasoans and area residents already know it.

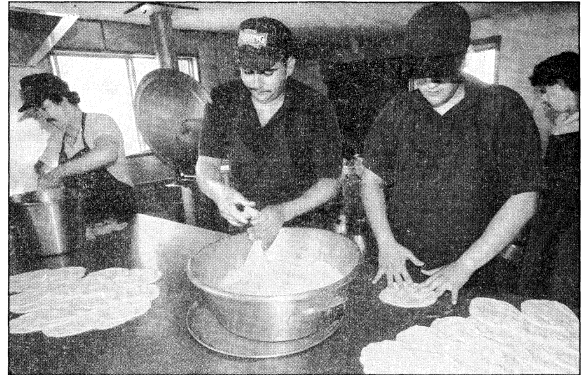
"We like to buy the *asadero* and bring our own sodas and have a picnic out there while the kids play," said Teresa Marquez, a Lower Valley resident who can't count the number of times she has driven up the narrow road leading to the tiny *asadero* store on the Licon ranch. "And with the birds and cows, it's almost like a little zoo. We really enjoy it."

Three generations strong in an agricultural life that has almost died, the Licon family has built a reputation for fresh savory *asaderos* (which the family spells "azaderos"), a preservative-free cheese made with just cow's milk and a little salt. Add the sight (and distinctive smell) of 300 cows grazing in the field and a string of quaint cages alongside the property housing everything from ducks, geese, pigeons and peacocks to a llama and a couple of ostriches, and you can bet most find a visit to the dairy a temporary vacation from the city.

"It is a pleasant life out here. Nobody bothers you and my family has been really happy living here," said Eugenio Licon, the patriarch who usually is up before sunrise getting started on a hard day's work that begins with the mechanical milking of the cows—about the only thing not done by hand.

Veronica Arellano, Licon's 27-year-old daughter, who lives across the street, said

she began helping her parents as a young girl, taking care of the customers. Now she's an ace at rolling the hot cheese into meatball size and then flattening it into its tortilla shape within seconds.



Leonel Monroy / El Paso Times
Licon Dairy employees, from left, Isidro Briseno, Eugenio Licon Jr. and Antonio Araiza prepare *asaderos* at the dairy.

And she takes a special pride in being a part of the family business.

"It's fun because there's nothing like this in El Paso. And we have people who come from all over the U.S. (to buy the cheese)," she said.

The elder Licon, who took over the business from his in-laws when it involved only five cows, built the *asadero* "factory" as a little room next to his home. Over the years, with the help of his wife, Licon began buying more cows, and landscaping the property around his house with trees and plants.

Since he and his wife were both animal lovers, Licon said they couldn't help but add a few geese and ducks to enhance their farm life.

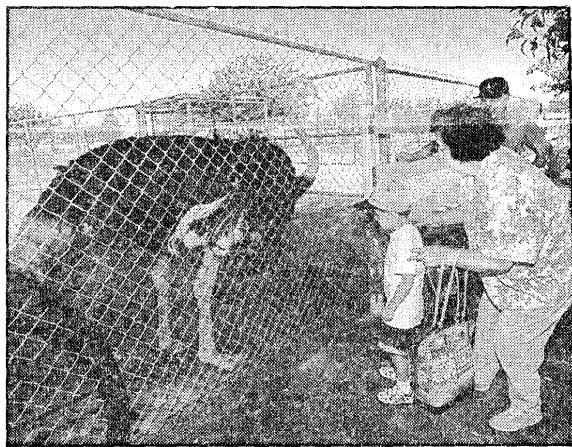
"My wife loves birds and so we later got pigeons and the peacocks." And then came the llama, deer and ostriches.

To entertain his grandchildren, Licon later placed two trampolines, swings, and picnic tables on a grassy lawn in front of the property.

But it's not just his grandchildren who have enjoyed the playground. Neighboring schools sometimes bring their students on field trips to the farm.

"A lot of the kids push their parents to bring them out on weekends so they can play," Licon said with a smile. "You would see all the kids having fun."

Of course, those who have driven to the dairy with a craving for fresh cheese usually leave satisfied.



Leonel Monroy / El Paso Times

Blasa Segura shows her 4-year-old grandson, Alan Segura, an ostrich at Licon Dairy while dairy owner Eugenio Licon watches.

But just like the Licons, the regulars know they have to get up early to get what they want.

By 10 a.m. on this early weekday morning, the butter is at gone; But there's still plenty of jalapeno cheese, asaderos and *suero* (whey).

With only his family to help in the business—seven days a week and even on holidays—the Licons process about 300 gallons

of milk each day, producing about 3,000 slices, or 300 packets, of asaderos.

And once those are gone—which usually occurs by 2 or 3 p.m.—business is over for the day.

"But my customers have always been nice and never gotten upset, even if they drive all the way here and there's no more asaderos," Licon said. "They just come in earlier next time or call and ask if there's still some."

Gilbert "Chino" Rueda, a longtime Fabens resident, is one of the lucky ones getting to buy several packages for his sons in San Antonio and Fort Stockton this day.

"They're the best," Rueda said, walking out with his sacked packets. "My sons always ask me for asaderos when I talk to them on the phone."

