



Mmatli (left) and Joel bringing in the cows for milking

# Goodbye city, hello farm

by Izak Hofmeyr

The Motaung family of the Thuloane Trust in the Rosendal area of the Free State, did not know what was in store for them when they exchanged city life for the farm seven years ago. But despite many struggles and difficulties, their dairy recently received two awards that made everything seem worthwhile. The one is a regional award for Free State Female Farmer of the Year in the category "Top producer: National Market", while the other is the award for the most improved emerging farmer at the Free State Master Dairyman competition.

Growing up in the Eastern Free State, Mmatli Motaung believed that farmers are rich, driving around in expensive bakkies. And, he smiles, he thought that he wanted a piece of the action. So, seven years ago, he acquired Brakvlei, some 10 km from Rosendal. He built up the farm quickly. The farming enterprise now consists of the dairy, sheep, maize and sunflowers.



The Motaungs on their farm. From the left are Puli, Joel, Wendy with Khopa and Mmatli



Puli doing her bit in the parlour

"Initially we had farm workers who also lived in the staff houses on the farm, but for some reason they decided that they did not want to work for a black farmer, so they left. The irony is that they still live on our land and we don't seem to be able to get them to move. This despite the fact that most of them have RDP houses in neighbouring towns.

"Meanwhile we work the farm ourselves – myself, my wife and our two eldest children who are still in school. Joel is in grade 12 and Puli is in grade 10. We also make use of temporary employees."

### Against all odds

Over the past seven years the Motaungs experienced several setbacks. Apart from the ongoing dispute with the occupants of their staff houses, they lost a number of cows: "We started with less than 27 cows, but after about four years we had 74. Due to some setbacks we are back to less than 50, of which only 16 are currently in milk."

Exchanging a comfortable lifestyle in Gauteng for the farming lifestyle in the Eastern Free State, says Mmatli, came with a price, but looking back neither he nor Wendy would want to go back to the city. The crux of the matter, says Wendy, is management. In their case, they made many mistakes, but learned valuable lessons, and are now in a position to guide newcomers to farming.

One of the most gratifying aspects of farm life, is the fact that it brings together the family, says Mmatli: "I am sure that the children miss city life, but they pitch in and pull their weight here on the farm. I would not be surprised if at least one of them chooses to make farming their career."

### Hygiene is everything

At the moment the Motaungs milk 16 cows. When this article was written, they also had six dry cows and 18 heifers due to start calving soon.

"When we started out we had to hand-milk the cows. It was a huge challenge, but taught us many valuable lessons," explains Mmatli. "It also gave us the proper perspective from the ground up. Now we have a milking machine, but I believe that you can achieve better hygiene with hand-milking.

"In the beginning, our first milk buyer was a neighbour who made yoghurt. He subjected our milk to stringent hygiene tests, and we came out tops. We made very sure that we maintain our hygiene standards when we switched over to machine milking."

Wendy says that despite them having to build up the farm by themselves, they did receive some essential government support: "The first thing that they did for us was to erect a good fence. There is also good support in terms of advice and information from the extension officer.

"Adam Swarahla and Karabo Molomo from the Agricultural Research Council's (ARC) milk recording scheme in Bloemfontein, also gave valuable advice and guidance in the dairy. That was how we got involved with the Master Dairyman competition."

### Production matters

Mmatli went on an artificial insemination course organised by the ARC in Bloemfontein and inseminates the cows himself. He also taught Wendy how to AI. He has very specific ideas on bull selection: "I think one should not concentrate on more than two traits at a time. I look for good udders and legs in my cows, so the bull I use is strong in that respect."

The feeding regime, says Wendy, is pretty robust. The cows are fed concentrates in the dairy, but eat mainly hay and green feed that has been specially planted.

"This winter has been a really difficult time for us," says Mmatli. "Our production is lower than usual, with our best producers giving around 20 litres per day, as opposed to around 40 litres in summer. We planted silage maize, but when it was ready for cutting, we could not find anybody to cut for us. So we are only feeding hay and some concentrates in the parlour."

### Parlour routine

Wendy adheres to a strict but simple routine in the dairy parlour, paying much attention to pre- and post-milk teat treatment and proper hygiene. She is proud of their low somatic cell counts and aims to keep it there. According to Karabo Molomo of the ARC, Thuloane Trust was the undisputed choice for the provincial title this year, based on their improvement over a year of visits every fifth week.

"During these visits we took milk samples (28 ml) from individual cows, which we then analysed for protein, butterfat, lactose and somatic cell count. We also measured the milk production of individual animals, using a spring scale; and we taught the Motaungs how to interpret laboratory test results.

"Wendy is a meticulous dairy manager. She keeps stringent records of everything and adheres to the best hygienic practices. There is no doubt that they deserve this award," Karabo confirms. 