

# How cows saved carrots

“A challenge is an opportunity in disguise.” In the case of the Sekita family, who have been farming in Brazil for the last 80 years, it really was. Their willingness to meet challenges head-on and to try new things has made them one of Brazil’s most successful agribusinesses.



Eduardo Sekita,  
CEO, Sekita Agronegócios

Japanese emigration to Brazil began in 1908 with many immigrants working in the expanding coffee industry. By the onset of World War II, the corridor was quickly closing; 19-year-old Katsuji Sekita packed a few clothes and booked a one-way ticket to Brazil. His future wife, Etsuko, had arrived in Brazil thirteen years earlier. After marrying, they bought a small farm in the state of Paraná, and with their hard-earned knowledge of farming, threw themselves into their work and raising a family.

## A COOPERATIVE IS BORN

The Sekita’s sons eventually set out on their own, establishing farms in the fertile São Gotardo region; first Tamio, then Seiji and finally the youngest, Makoto, as well as the elder Sekita’s themselves, made the move. It was hard going with lots of challenges, politically and physically, as many areas still required opening up for farming. However, in time, all three sons were successfully growing coffee, beans, corn and wheat – pooling their resources to hire employees, purchase inputs and negotiate prices for their crops.

With a handful of friends and family members, the Sekitas formed their cooperative in 1991, with Makoto serving as CEO for the first 25 years. Carrots and later garlic were brought under cultivation. Eduardo, a third-generation grandson was drawn to the work his uncles were doing, studying agronomy before joining the team in 1999; he has served as CEO since 2015. The dairy business is expertly managed by another third-generation family member, Leonardo Garcia, Makoto’s son-in-law.

## JUST ADD MILK

In 2007, with fertilizer reaching upwards of 3,000 to 4,000 kilos per hectare, costs weighed heavily on the group. They identified three options, all of which involved generating manure to alleviate fertilizer costs: breed pigs, raise steers or implement a dairy farm. In discussions with GEA, they decided to add dairy cattle due to the quality and volume of the expected manure and the efficient space requirements of the cows, thanks in part to the GEA Freestall system they would purchase.

Although lacking experience, their own determination combined with GEA’s expertise and support, allowed them to get the dairy off the ground by 2008, “Eleven years ago, when we started the dairy business, GEA was the only company that fulfilled all of our aspirations. They gave us the most support regarding animal comfort, milking and issues related to manure,” says Eduardo Sekita.

## REAPING THE REWARDS OF GOOD STEWARDSHIP

The dairy has been a clear win-win. It allowed the Sekita cooperative to optimize the land by adding another activity using existing acreage, without reducing vegetable production; optimize the use of their existing machinery; and lower their overall costs while generating a monthly revenue stream from milk sales, thus enabling better cash flow. They have also reduced the corn crop cycle by producing silage for feed and reduced nutrient exports by rotating other animal feed crops, which they’ve also learned to use more efficiently. Overall productivity is higher thanks to the application of manure.

## THE POWER OF SMART WASTE MANAGEMENT

A common complaint leveled at farmers with cows is that the manure is improperly managed and bad for the environment. With the Sekita dairy herd hovering around 1,500 cows, plus 300 dry cows and 2,000 calves and heifers, manure management has been a top priority since day one.

The first step in the process is collecting the manure, urine, animal bedding and water from the sprinklers and placing it all in a homogenization tank where the solids are separated from the liquid. The liquid waste then goes to the biodigester, which produces methane gas, which in turn is converted into electricity. The electricity powers the machine that washes the carrots and provides the energy for the cold storage rooms.

After the bacteria have transformed the liquid waste into biofertilizer, it’s applied to the crops via the irrigation system. The solid part of the waste is sent to a composting

area – along with other vegetable waste – and eventually applied to the fields to replenish the soil’s organic matter.

## FUTURE-PROOFING SUCCESS

Not immune to the turbulences in the dairy industry, Sekita Agronegócios depends on the quality of all of its products for its success. “We always work with the best genetics and the best feed to produce the best quality milk in the region. That’s how we achieve differentiated prices,” explains Sekita. “We have a wide range of products and when the price drops in one, others help keep the business viable. It’s all about optimizing resources.”

Today, the Sekita cooperative has more than 40 members. Milk production is around 20 million liters per year (54,000 liters/day) and roughly 100,000 tons of vegetables, raised on 3,000 hectares, are sold each year throughout Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. The work is carried out by 1,500 dedicated employees.

In 2017, the highly awarded Sekita Agronegócios was recognized as the fourth largest milk producer in Brazil according to the Top100 MilkPoint survey. “What we’re proud of is not our ranking,” says Sekita humbly. “We see this as a result of teamwork – and as a team we’re always in search of excellence, which means producing quality food in a sustainable way.”

## A partnership for the long haul

With a relationship spanning more than 10 years, GEA continues to provide Sekita Agronegócios with superior end-to-end service and solutions covering milking, cooling, barn and manure equipment and diverse products for cleaning. With their GEA ExpertCare Services agreement, Sekita can rely on at least three onsite visits per month, equipment inspections, spare parts and key supplies, ensuring that their milking process is running smoothly.

