

'Queen' writes of her spiritual realm

BY JO-ANN GREENE
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The title of Deborah A. Benner's "Fifth Avenue Princess to American Dairy Queen" might lead a reader to think Lancaster County's Ree Drummond ("High Heels to Tractor Wheels") has driven into the bookstore on a milk truck.

There's the familiar "Green Acres" scenario: City slickers meet country bumpkins. But then these women ended up marrying a hunky specimen, transforming their lives.

While Drummond writes about cooking and homeschooling on an Oklahoma ranch, Benner tells of her spiritual journey through love and marriage on a Mount Joy dairy farm.

Her memoir is exuberant, intensely personal and perhaps — considering her Mennonite in-laws — a little too frank. Here's a sample: "Never in all my life, or in any of my travels abroad, had I ever experienced a more closed-off, exclusive community than in Lancaster, Penn-

sylvania!"

As the author frequently reminds readers, she's Italian, she's an actress, and she's from New York City and Texas. Drama, exaggeration and outspokenness all come naturally.

Yes, there's humor, too. But Benner has a serious testimony to present, as she dips as far back as 1989 into her own spiritual journals to understand how God was directing, or trying to direct, her life, after she prayed for a husband.

Deborah Caldarola was hired to act in Sight & Sound's production of "Noah" for six months in 1995. Within weeks of meeting, she and Arlin Benner were engaged; five months later they married. He was 31, she was 37; it was the second marriage for both.

Part I, "A Walk in the Park," shows how falling in love with a Lancaster County Mennonite man was anything but such a "walk." This section takes up more than half of the nearly 200-page hardcover.

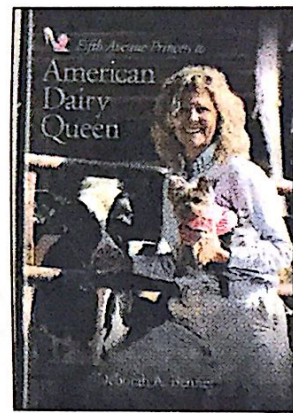
Part II, "The Children," tells of the couple's heartbreakingly unsuccessful attempts to start a family

naturally, medically, adoptively.

Part III, "No Babies ... No Career ... No Way I'm Staying Here," shows how she reconciled herself to farm life, christening the place Yippee! Farms, based on her reaction to the birth of each calf, and adopting Malachi 4:2: "But for you who revere my name, the Son of righteousness will rise with healing in His wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."

Part IV, "No Going Back" shows how she eventually embraced farm life, getting herself appointed to the National Dairy Board in order to have some say into how the National Dairy Board used farmer's advertising dollars.

After that, "I was elected to and appointed to serve on an array of local and national agricultural boards



and hence the reason for my new title among family and friends: The Dairy Queen! ... For a short time I was the 'manure queen.' I made sure that title got dropped fast."

In Part V, "Getting Comfortable in the Backseat," Benner relates how the leadership role she assumed as a "town crier" in agribusiness was undermining her 14-year marriage. A Bible study helped her see how she needed to

change to restore the most important relationship in her life: the one with God and her husband.

All those agrarian-based Bible verses hit home. "God speaks of the tilling of the hard heart and opening it up to plant seed — the seed of the Word of God — as a painful process," she writes.

But then the harvest is bountiful.

The author will sign her book, priced at \$21.99, from 6-9 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 13, at Room With a View, 64 E. Main St., Mount Joy.