

Making America Organic...One Home At a Time!



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Feedlot Operations Irk Farmers, Consumers

By Steve Karnowski

The cows on Pam and Jeff Riesgraf's farm chomped happily away on lush green grass on a warm, sunny afternoon. Their milk would soon find its way to grocery stores, where organic dairy products are a hot item.

The Riesgraf farm represents one vision for organic dairy - small- and medium-sized family farms where the cows have names and spend the growing season on pasture. But a different kind of organic dairy farm is emerging out west - corporate-owned feedlot operations with thousands of cows that are fed organic grain but, according to critics, get little chance to graze.

Fears that big operations will muscle out family farms have produced a backlash, including a boycott by the Organic Consumers Association against the country's biggest organic milk brand, Horizon Organic.

Organic farmers and consumer groups are hoping the U.S. Department of Agriculture will level the field. The agency is considering whether to mandate that milk bearing the "USDA Organic" seal come from cows that have significant access to pasture, a move smaller producers say would give them the protection they need.

Chris Hoffman drank Horizon milk until she learned about the dispute and switched brands.

The Sherburne, N.Y., woman said she'd thought she was buying milk from "family farms with happy cows." To her, feedlot milk does not follow the spirit of organic farming. "I just think it's patently dishonest. And it just really ticked me off," she said.

Horizon, part of Fort Worth, Tex.-based Dean Foods Co., sells about half of the organic milk in this country, through retailers including Wal-Mart Stores Inc. Its president and CEO, Joe Scalzo, said Horizon is a strong supporter of family farms, helping hundreds make the transition to organic. Horizon is just trying to meet the "exponential"

growth in a market where demand outstrips supply by some 20 percent, he said.

However, Mark Kastel, senior farm policy analyst with the research group Cornucopia Institute, countered, "There's been a near consensus in the organic community that these factory farms are repugnant to the consumer and put organic farms at a disadvantage."

Kastel said organic milk consumers are willing to pay more because they believe it's produced to higher ethical standards that benefit the environment, the animals and family farmers.

"They don't think they're supporting rich corporate investors who think organics is a great way to cash in," he said.

The Organic Trade Association says the U.S. organic dairy sector raked up \$2.1 billion in sales last year, up 24 percent from 2004. The OTA says organics now make up 3.5 percent of all dairy products sold in the U.S.

While Broomfield, Colo.-based Horizon has taken the most heat, the critics also slam Aurora Organic Dairy, of Boulder, Colo., which provides private-label organic milk to chains including Costco, Safeway, Giant and Wild Oats.

Aurora says it milks about 4,100 and 3,500 cows at its farms near Platteville, Colo., and Dublin, Texas, and will open a 3,200-cow operation near Kearsy, Colo., this fall.

The company says its approach is unique in the organic dairy sector, allowing it to keep prices affordable while producing the highest quality milk. Aurora says its cows get a balanced diet that includes organic grain and hay, as well as grazing on organic pasture.

Aurora spokeswoman Amy Barr said organic standards shouldn't be based on an "image of Old MacDonald's Farm" held by people who may never have been on a farm. Pasture is important, but it's not the only measure of animal welfare,
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Harvest Blend Regular

- Cauliflower
- Carrots
- Zucchini
- Green Romaine Lettuce
- Red Onions
- Alfalfa Sprouts
- Tomatoes
- Spinach
- Blueberries
- Strawberries
- Diamond Nectarines
- Bananas
- Tommy Atkins Mango

See the web site for details on our other options. Produce bag contents are subject to change based on availability.

OO Reminder

Now that warmer days are upon us, please remember it is your responsibility to leave a cooler outside your door if you are not home to receive the delivery.

This is especially important if you are receiving dairy with your produce.

While we have, in the past, left the thermal bags at your door, we would really prefer not to do so, as the return rate on these bags is often a problem for us.

A cooler is also better for you because ice packs in the cooler will do a better job of keeping your food fresh in the ambient temperature than our bags without any ice.

Thank you for your business, and let us know if you have any questions.

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nor is an all-grass diet necessarily the best for a cow's health, she said.

Executives with Austin, Texas-based Whole Foods Market Inc. recently toured Horizon's Idaho farm and were pleased with improvements made there, said Margaret Wittenberg, vice president of communications and quality standards.

"The cows looked in good health. They were certainly curious, which is always a good sign. They're being taken care of," Wittenberg said

Whole Foods was not impressed, however, by Aurora's Colorado farm. "It remains unacceptable for us," she said, declining to elaborate.

The USDA is now drafting a proposed rule that will likely come out this fall, and there will be another comment period, spokeswoman Joan Shaffer said.

Horizon supports the key proposal, which would require that organic cows spend at least 120 days a year on pasture, Scalzo said.

Aurora opposes that standard as unscientific and told the USDA eastern Colorado gets only about 45 to 60 days of significant edible grass per year.

The nation's largest farmer-owned organic dairy co-op, the Organic Valley Family of Farms, based in LaFarge, Wis., says its 572 family-owned dairy farms nationwide already exceed the proposed standards.

Organics have been a lifeline to many family farmers because organic milk fetches a higher price than conventional milk, allowing dairies to stay small. The Riesgrafs, who milk about 55 cows near Jordan southwest of Minneapolis, credit Organic Valley with keeping them in business.

"We have a stable price, and we've slowly been increasing our price," Jeff Riesgraf said.

A few miles away, near New Prague, Dave and Florence Minar have carved out their own niche, producing and bottling organic milk at Cedar Summit Farm, which milks about 160 cows.

Dave Minar and the Riesgrafs said they're confident they can compete as long as the USDA requires meaningful access to pasture. They don't back the boycott, and sympathize with the smaller organic farmers who supply Horizon.

"We're trying to farm our land and our livestock in the way nature intended," Minar said.

Recipes

Pasta Salad With Artichokes & Sprouts

- 1 cup raw pasta
- 3/4 pound marinated artichoke hearts
- 3/4 cup alfalfa sprouts
- 1 small green pepper, finely chopped
- 1 carrot, coarsely chopped
- 1/2 cup sliced/chopped black olives
- 1/4 cup red wine vinegar
- 1/2 tsp dried basil
- 1/2 tsp dried summer savory

Cook the pasta al dente, then rinse it with cool water. Drain the pasta well and put it in a mixing bowl. Chop the artichokes into bite-sized pieces and add them to the pasta.

Add the alfalfa sprouts, separating the strands as much as possible with a fork, and the remaining ingredients. Mix well and allow to stand for 1 to 2 hours either at room temperature or refrigerated before serving.

Sesame Slaw

- 4 cups shredded green cabbage
- 1 cup shredded carrots
- 1 cup thinly sliced radishes
- 2 cups alfalfa sprouts, divided
- 1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds
- 2 tbsp reduced-calorie mayonnaise
- 1/4 cups plain nonfat yogurt
- 1 1/2 tsp rice wine vinegar (or apple cider vinegar)
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp celery seed

In a large bowl, toss together cabbage, carrots, radishes, 1 cup alfalfa

sprouts, and sesame seeds. In a small bowl, whisk together mayonnaise, yogurt, vinegar, sugar, salt, and celery seed; pour over vegetables and toss to coat. Chill before serving. To serve, spread remaining cup of alfalfa sprouts on serving platter, and top with sesame slaw.

Curried Eggs with Sprouts

- 3 cups bean sprouts
- 4 hard-cooked eggs
- 1 tsp curry powder
- 1/4 cup sliced green onions or chives
- 1 1/2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp red wine vinegar
- salt and freshly -ground black pepper to taste

Lightly sauté the bean sprouts with a tablespoon or so of water, half the green onions, and salt to taste until just tender. Set aside to cool. Remove shells from eggs and slice eggs in half lengthwise.

Mash yolks with curry powder, remaining green onions, olive oil, vinegar, and salt and pepper to taste. To serve, mound bean sprouts on individual plates, then place 2 egg halves on each mound.

Colby Alfalfa Sandwich

- 2 slices whole grain white bread
- 1 tsp yellow mustard
- 2 slices longhorn Colby cheese
- 2 slices tomato
- 4 slices dill pickle
- 1/4 cup alfalfa sprouts
- 2 tbsp cream cheese, softened

It's a sandwich, you know what to do!