

DAIRY HEALTH 101 - February 8, 2007

How is the health of the American Dairy Industry? That depends on what markers are used to gauge health. That also depends on what you call the American Dairy Industry. There are at least two different Dairy Industries and they are producing at least two different milks. More than half of the milk in America is produced on less than 3% of the dairy farms. Those 3% are industrial confinement operations where cows produce large volumes on principally grain diets, living relatively short lives. To those people who believe milk is milk, let them have this commodity Dairy Industry. That is their privilege in a free market, after all.

There should also be able to exist another Dairy Industry, perhaps some part of those other 97% of the dairy farms, who produce lower volumes of higher nutritional component milk from cows of greater longevity. This Industry could produce a milk that actually justifies a Class 1 premium for fresh fluid milk.

With the commitment of our government and the Dairy Industry to greater consumption of fluid milk, it is difficult to understand how the great virtue of dairy products; nutritive value, is subject to so little curiosity, investigation, or discovery. We've satisfied ourselves with 40 year old dietary knowledge of calcium and protein. What low expectations we really seem to have for milk! Perhaps that is only possible because Dairy Industry has accepted that milk is only a commodity, that milk is milk.

The greatest insult to a scientist or engineer is to be called uncurious. How curious are we about milk? Are we compelled to learn about the nutritive components in milk and how to maximize their production? For ten years the Industry has been aware of grass pasture feeding giving higher conjugated linoleic acid levels. Shouldn't this be the kind of thing that makes a healthy Dairy Industry reach out and learn more, striving always to produce a better milk?

Whether you're a Darwinist or a Creationist there is no logic suggesting unhealthful dairy products would either co-evolve or be given to man. Current wisdom that full fat dairy foods are harmful is hogwash. The goodness is in the fat. Get over it. The food scientists were all wrong to love margarine and hate cheese.

Butter from grass fed cows is a bit of summer sunshine all year round. Spread it over those fresh cooked vegetables that we are supposed to be eating more of. Cheese is one of the most concentrated satisfying and naturally produced foods on the planet. Roman armies, then Genghis Khan, conquered their worlds running on cheese.

Let's stop apologizing for milk, or its butterfat. In the years to come we will be amazed to find out the numerous benefits from butter consumption. Appreciation of the role of vitamin D is growing with some nutritionists setting recommended daily requirements to five times current minimums. Conjugated linoleic acids (CLA) are called one of the most potent cancer fighting nutritive substances known. Dairy products are arguably the best source of CLA in the world diet. Why aren't we aggressively looking into how to assure adequate CLA production in raw milk and consider whether CLA may also be an issue in the cow's health?

A major reason for dairy cow culling is infertility. CLA supplements are commonly given confinement cows to improve fertility. What is the health of an Industry that does not jump at the opportunity to protect and develop the value of its product, and to crow the benefits of its product to the world

I am reminded how Woody Allen, when asked if sex was dirty, replied that it was, if you did it right. With regard to milk production, there may also be ways other than highest volume/lowest cost to do it right. Why, some Luddites declare that only from good healthy soil can healthy forage grow. Only from healthy forage can healthy cows grow. Only those healthy cows can make healthy milk. Thank heavens we are protected by the arrogance of our scientific knowledge and have learned that we can reduce to a few dozen ingredients ground together and pressed into pellets everything dairy cows might need. Really?

Any cheesemaker will tell you that milk is not milk. Some varieties of cheese can only be made in a special area with the combination of soil, forage, state of lactation, breed, and weather to make uniquely suited milk. Some cheeses can only be produced during certain weeks or months when everything is right. Milk is milk?

Milk is so complex, of such great variety, that we are likely a century away from realizing its potentials and functionalities. We should investigate milk components and understand their variations, particularly with regard to environmental factors and feeding. We should look for markers to guide the production of particularly healthful milk.

We can look to the cows health as indicative of the milk which the cow produces. Perhaps the most obvious general marker for health is longevity. After all, cows that are not functioning well are culled. Any cow capable of another gestation, unless it is visually deteriorating or impaired, is likely a good healthy cow producing good healthy milk.

Dairy farmers know that colostrum from first year heifers is of lower functionality, has less antibodies and is less healthful for young calves, than the colostrum from older cows. Dairy farmers commonly discard first year heifer's colostrum and feed those first year heifers' calves the colostrum from older cows. As such,

might it be assumed that the health of the milk produced by a herd of older dairy cows could be generally healthier?

Milk after all is a uniquely extraordinary food. One might say that it is the only food freely given without taking a life. As such the cow is uniquely gifted to grace man. Now don't let me get too 1960's but what about the dignity of the animals that supply our food. Perhaps if we were more caring of our animals, and considered their dignity, we wouldn't be of a nature to allow our own brothers and sisters to suffer the loss of dignity they do in Haiti and Sudan and on and on. Oh, well, I digress.

What about the pure simple common sense free market math of it all? The comparison of grazing dairy farms where the investment is in the land and cows. Where improving the land and its forage is the way to add value and create wealth and health. Building up herds of genetically diverse cows, raised generation after generation and adapted to the local weather and forage. Grazing dairy operations commonly grow forage up to knee high, and have it promptly eaten down again by grazing cows, many times per year. This carbon dioxide consuming carbon fixing metabolism is the way we need our agriculture to go. It is more sustainable, efficient, and desirable, than agriculture based on burning petroleum products to transport mono culture grains to concentrated relatively immobile and sheltered cows.

Thomas Edison said "There must be a better way. Find it!" This is what we must do. For that 3% of large confinement farms, the current commodity based volume driven globalizable exportable manufactured industrial dairy model works just fine. Unfortunately, it may be preventing the other Dairy Industry which could produce a truly premium fresh drinking milk from being able to exist. Is this free market capitalism or restraint of trade?

The Federal Market Order System as originally conceived has held that producer/handlers can exist and be part of the healthy mix and checks and balances. To me, the actions last year to limit the size of those producer/handlers was an action on the part of the few, in the name of the many, for the gain of a few, anti competitive and contrary to the intent of the Federal Market Order System. We need to be vigilant and prevent any further degrading of the producer/handler's potential role in America's Dairy Industry. To do otherwise is to further the mono culture of commodity dairy with disregard for the customer's desire for a more traditional product.

Back when the Federal Market Order System was started, and in the first 40 or 50 years of its life, fresh drinking milk with a nominal shelf life of less than two weeks made up 70% of America's milk production. Providing a Class I premium was critically important to recognizing that fresh drinking milk had higher costs associated with its production, and its distribution within a couple short weeks. Now, with two thirds of our milk being used for Class II, III, and IV manufactured

products, few of which have a shelf life of less than 6 weeks, balancing and providing an adequate Class I supply is not really the issue that it was. Tanker trucks of cream commonly run from California to Wisconsin. Tankers of milk run from the Midwest to the southeast. Fluid milk shelf life has been extended from days, to over 3 weeks. Virtually all the milk produced in America now meets Class I standards.

“Pro choice” today might mean a woman’s choice to buy milk produced in the way she wants. With milk retailing for less per gallon than bottled water, the lowest cost excuse for not optimizing milk quality is lame. It has no legs. Today’s pro choice young women want milk produced without hormones in traditional outdoor grazing dairy operations which focus on producing outstanding fresh drinking milk for children. This choice is not available to the vast majority of American women and young mothers. What is the health of a Dairy Industry that does not serve this need?

As the Dairy Industry, and thousands of dairy farmers nationwide, look forward to this year’s Farm Bill and consider dairy subsidies, in relation to their own operations how many are concerned with their consumer? How many of them are concerned with the concepts of continuous improvement with regard to the nutritional quality of their milk? A Dairy Industry that believes it survives on its government subsidy is no more healthful than the beggar who will work for food sign at the stop light. Let’s take our own future into our hands by reconnecting with our customer and affirming our commitment to give customers the very finest fresh drinking milk we can produce.