



EDITOR'S COLUMN

Turning fresh milk into artisan cheese is a way for dairy producers to get more value for their hard work." - Jennifer Bice, Red Hill Dairy

Dairy has been king in the north bay for the last eighty years. Every farm or ranch today was once a dairy. Milk makes up well over half of Marin's yearly gross agricultural value, and supports not only the families who run the dairies, but a feed and supply industry, dairy machinery workers, veterinarians and animal nutritionists. The cool coastal Mediterranean climate, a temperate rainfall, and abundant grasslands are a magic combination that brings forth rich milk.

Milk in our north bay counties is now a commodity that is tied to state, federal, and industry regulations and pricing structures. When milk prices are good, everybody is happy. When they fall, sometimes below production cost, things get scary. With the increased competition from mega-dairies in the valley, and increased fuel costs to import feed, our most productive agricultural resource is increasingly at risk.

Sometimes change is slow to come to a system that has served us well for decades. But as things

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Normandy north of the gate

MARIN DAIRIES

RETOOL FOR CHEESE

Fresh butter from Point Reyes was the signature Marin product 150 years ago. Schooners would pick up the golden largess at docks along Tomales Bay, and parts of Drakes Bay, on their way for delivery to San Francisco and other California ports. In 1862, Marin dairies provided one fourth of California's milk and ranked first for butter production.



Lush grasslands nursed by the cool coastal climate and moderate rainfall produce some of the best pasture in California. The abundant grasses from these coastal prairies are transformed into rich, creamy, fluid milk that is the cheesemakers' ultimate canvas to preserve and enhance the milk, much like the butter makers of the last century.

With the invention of modern refrigeration and improved transportation, fluid milk became king and butter and cheese dwindled away here in the north bay. The milk boom kept the farms going through the years after WWII. There were 200 dairies in Marin County in 1950. Milk had become a commodity. The boom lasted through the 1970s, when increased environmental regulations and the emergence of larger dairies in the central valley put pressure on the farms and the decline began.

Today there are 27 dairies in Marin. Wildly fluctuating commodity milk prices and tough competition from huge central valley dairy operations make it tough for smaller farms to survive. Farm succession is threatened by weak profits as kids find more lucrative professions off the farm. What is a farmer to do?

Make cheese. Bob Giacomini, partner in Point Reyes Original Blue Cheese, put it this way, *"What goes around, comes around,"* harkening back to the days of a more diversified local dairy production. Bob and his family have added value to their fresh milk by making farmstead cheese out of it. *"My wife and I have always had in the back of our minds that some day some how we wanted to not just sell our milk that we get from our cows but be able to take it to the next level and produce a product ourselves that we could*



Monty McIntyre, head cheese maker at Point Reyes Original Blue Cheese.

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The Yeomans plow



The Marin Resource Conservation District (MRCD) co-sponsored a workshop in December on keyline land planning including a demonstration of an essential implement, the Yeomans plow. Darren Doherty, Australian

farm consultant, talked about and demonstrated the Yeomans plow at the Giacomini Dairy. The sessions were attended by local ranchers, agricultural support organizations, and other curious folks.

P. A. Yeomans developed his keyline method of capturing and using his scarce water in Australia. The Yeomans plow is an integral part of keyline design that involves plowing in a pattern that keeps water high up in the landscape and capturing and storing rainfall runoff in small ponds and in the soil. The Yeomans plow creates a pattern of micro ridges and valleys across slopes to slow runoff, increase rainfall infiltration, loosen compacted soil for deeper rooting, and improve soil water storage capacity.

"We were interested in exposing local ranchers to this information and determining their interest in the Yeomans plow - we want to know how useful it might be for producers in this area," said Nancy Scolari, Executive Director for the MRCD.

Charlette Epifanio, District Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, thinks that the plow *"has great potential to enhance our watersheds - it's a tool that could*

help establish perennial grasses which do a much better job of protecting water quality and promoting better forage production." With a note of caution she added, *"We would like to see folks trying it out - but we need to be careful that it's used in appropriate places - so that it doesn't cause more land slippage to occur."*

So what do producers think? *"It's premature to make decisions, but I'm very excited and interested to see what kind of production we get next spring,"* said Paul Zimmerman, manager of the Giacomini dairy, where fields were plowed during the demonstration. *"The equipment makes a lot of sense."* - Lisa Bush



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take to the consumers. We had two choices, either we sell the farm or somebody can come to the farm and help with the cheese operation."

Joining the traditional farm families like the Giacominis, new-entry farmers are adding new energy to



Marsha Barinaga from Marshall with her Friesian ewes.

the mix. Marcia Barinaga and Cory Goodwin from Marshall are in the early stages of launching a farmstead sheep dairy and cheese-making operation. Marcia has Basque origins, and some of the finest sheep cheese in the world is Basque-made. She and her husband Cory traveled to the Pyrenees this year and spent time learning the art of sheep cheese, then returned to purchase a small herd of Friesian and Katahdin sheep to begin breeding for the creamery, which is planned for completion next year. The cheese-making plant will follow in 2009.

Marcia and Cory are among the new pioneers joining our agricultural community and taking advantage of Marin's climate and grasslands to make cheese. Marcia appreciates both the landscape and her reception in the ag community. *"We have learned so much from the land and the community here. We feel strongly that we want to participate in farming and taking care of the land. We hope to join in with a great sheep cheese."*

Great cheese comes from great milk, which comes from great grass and forage. Tom Kirkland from Bloomfield now has two of those requirements: forage for the goat herd and a new dairy. Tom grew up milking cows on the family dairy, located on the green grasslands of the Valley Ford-Bloomfield plain. After a career with the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery, Tom returned to dairying, this time with goats. The demand for fresh, high quality goats milk is very high right now. *"We sell every drop of our milk to Redwood Hill Dairy, for cheese and yogurt,"* says Tom as he runs another batch of Nubians and Alpines up the ramp and into the milking stalls. Tom and his wife Heidi restored the old family dairy early in 2007 and today are milking 100 does, with more on the way. All the milk

CHEESE MAKERS



Tom Kirkland of Oh Tommy Boys Farm in Bloomfield is milking 100 goats. Tom added the dairy to his small cattle operation and quite large potato farm. Tom grew up milking cows, worked for the Petaluma Creamery and recently returned to farming.

goes to cheese. Tom has the built-in skills of a dairyman and has brought the dairy on line in just eight months. Tom and Heidi have in the back of their minds a small cheese plant in the future, but Tom is not yet ready to commit to the enterprise. He is interested, but the 24/7 milking routine has him pretty busy. "I could use a little more help," he mentions casually.

The Kirkland goat dairy, along with Toluma Farms nearby, both sell milk to Redwood Hill Dairy, run by Jennifer Bice. "We pay top dollar to these new farmers to help them get their operations going. It is difficult to run a dairy and a cheese operation at the same time. We try to encourage new farmers by helping them to get their dairies going first." Jennifer, along with Sue Conley and Peggy Smith from Cowgirl Creamery, are strong supporters of the new wave of artisan cheese makers and small dairies that are emerging in the north bay. "Why import and purchase cheeses from half-way around the world when we can produce them with equal or superior quality right here? We can do the same thing in the north bay and it is all local."



Jennifer Bice, left, owns and operates Redwood Hill Dairy and makes cheese and yogurt from goats milk. Debra Dickerson, 3D Cheese, and Lassa Skinner from Napa presented at UCCE's Cheese Makers Event in November.

MARIN FARMERS MARKET

Farm to fork delivers!

The Marin Center for Sustainable Agriculture (MCSA), in partnership with Marin Farmers Markets, is providing Farm to Fork, a county-wide fresh food delivery service sourced from Marin Farmers Markets.

This year Farm to Fork has brought \$100,000 in financial return to local producers. More than a dozen customers regularly use this program. On average 22-30 producers participate each week. Farmers attending the Thursday Marin Farmers Markets simply load up product that has been pre-ordered, bring it to the market, and MCSA takes it from there, providing invoicing, education, marketing materials, and delivery.

Marin producers include Little Organic Farm, County Line Harvest, Woodside Farms, Marin Roots Farms, Star Route Farms, Paradise Valley Produce, and Marin Sun Farms. "The logistics work out really well. We harvest for the Thursday Marin Farmers Market at the same time as for Farm to Fork. We already know we've sold product before we get to the market. Farm to Fork is a way to decrease our carbon footprint by adding more product to the trucks that are already heading to the market," said David Redsky, of County Line Harvest.

The participating local farms (including Marin and Sonoma) are small, sustainable, and within 200 miles of Marin. Customers include Autodesk, Comforts Café, Katie Powers Catering, and Fresh Choice, as well as Acre Gourmet, Kentfield Rehabilitation Center, Walker Creek Ranch, Branson School, and Tam High School District.

The convenience, freshness, and quality of product, sustainable growing practices, and distance from farm to fork appeal to our customers. "Previously, when I wanted fresh local products to serve for our lunch program or a special event, I would take my wagon and a stack of cash to the farmers' market. Now it comes to our back door via the Farm to Fork program, which enables us to support local farmers and offer their wonderful products to our students daily," said Branson School's Chef Richard Bartlett.

A second day of delivery begins in 2008, allowing more customers, particularly schools, to take advantage of the program; and at the same time increasing revenue to Sunday Marin Farmers Market members who choose to be a part of Farm to Fork.

Farm to Fork is laying some of the ground work for the Marin Center for Sustainable Agriculture – a permanent home for the Marin Farmers Markets.

- Leah Smith and Amelia Spilger

Marin Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Marin Farmers Markets

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start to change, innovations and explorations begin to have an effect. Some of the traditional dairy farm families adding value to their fluid milk by making cheese, butter, and yogurt. It was, after all, their grandfathers who created the famous Point Reyes Butter brand. Returning to the farm, producers like Tom Kirkland are renovating family dairy barns to bring goat milk to market, prized for cheese making. New entry farmers like Marcia Barinaga are pushing the edge by milking sheep and creating a Basque-style artisan sheep cheese. Tamara Hicks and her husband David Jablons have rebuilt the former Gobbi dairy and are now milking goats and shipping to Redwood Dairy. They plan to make a specialty cheese soon. Saint Anthony Farms is producing a delicious specialty butter, under the direction of Tim Kehoe.

Artists everywhere are eager to find the best materials possible for their creations, sometimes searching the world over for a rare find. Artisan cheese makers are often considered to be craftsmen. Perhaps the lush green grasses of Marin, which combine with well-tended cows to produce the incredibly rich and pure milk, is what they are looking for. We have plenty of it. - *Steve Quirt, Editor*

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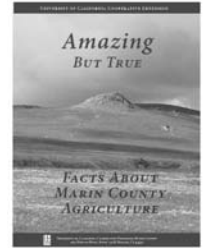


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University of California and United States Department of Agriculture & County of Marin Cooperating

News from Marin County Farms, Ranches, and Producers

☞ UCCE has just completed an updated version of **"Amazing but True: Facts about Marin Agriculture."** This little booklet is a rich resource of information about farming here in Marin, and is available at growninmarin.org.



☞ The first **Statewide Dairy Goat Conference** is planned for **May 14-15, 2008**, at the UCCE office in Merced. Contact Deborah Giraud, UCCE Farm Advisor, Humboldt Co., 707-445-7351

☞ **Deborah Walton of Canvas Ranch** will present two workshops at **EcoFarm at Asilomar January 23-26** on her **specialty breeds of sheep and goats** for weed management, and on **Community Supported Agriculture** featuring farmers who are using their farms as tools of social justice and incorporating product diversity.

☞ **Grafting & Pruning Workshop Jan. 29, 2008!** UCCE is offering a grafting & pruning workshop at the Gale Ranch. Rootstock will be provided, so bring your "wood" to graft. Paul Vossen, apple expert, will demonstrate the processes. \$20 FEE covers rootstock and refreshments. Register early at <http://ucanr.org/graftingpruning> at the web site, www.growninmarin.org.

☞ **Roundtable Discussion On Funding For Agricultural Worker Housing, January 23, 2008, 10:00 a.m. Dance Palace, Point Reyes Station.** Apply for funding from the State of California for farmworker housing. The County is interested in applying for these funds for a small pilot project. Direct questions to Leelee Thomas at 499-6697.

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