



EDITOR'S COLUMN

I am personally convinced that one person can be a change catalyst, a 'transformer' in any situation, any organization. Such an individual is yeast that can leaven an entire loaf. It requires vision, initiative, patience, respect, persistence, courage, and faith to be a transforming leader. - Steven Covey

Much of what we read in the news is about how hard it is to keep farming today: the escalating threat of inexpensive imports, the advancing age of the farmer population, the lack of generational succession, and so forth. But there is a break in the economic weather pattern. With the rising tide of consumer interest in sustainable and organically grown, locally produced food, new life is slowly invigorating our national agriculture. This is for real. Walmart and other huge chains are sprouting organic store programs. Organic now constitutes two percent of national food sales, with over twenty percent growth per year. Some forecasters are predicting that organic will reach twenty percent of the total gross value of food sold in the USA in ten years. Nobody knows for sure, but there is certainly an industry change occurring.

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New kids on the block

The next generation moves into organic dairying

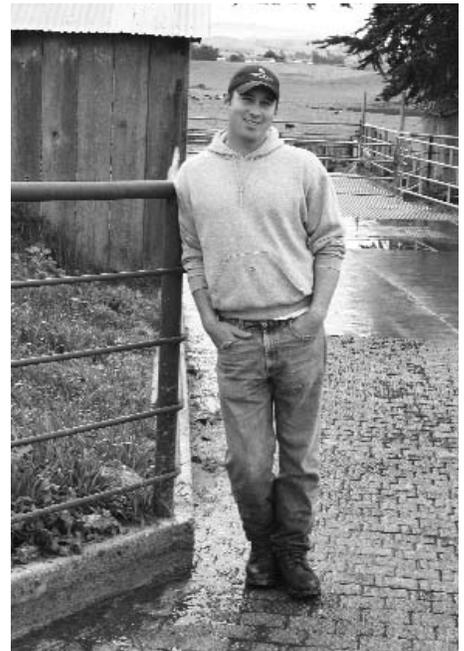
"Taking our dairy organic has allowed me to stay in the dairy business," says Jarrid Bordessa from Valley Ford, "It's given me a chance to keep doing what I love most, dairying." Looking over Jarrid's family operation, it is obvious that he takes organic transition and production seriously. With organic milk checks twice that of conventional, transition to the lucrative new market has become a serious issue, and the Bordessa enterprise shows that it can be done in a simple, well-run operation. Jarrid, along with newly minted organic dairy farmers Dayna Wilson Ghiradelli, her brother Howard Wilson, Robert McClelland, and Jolynn Mendoza, make up the school of young farmers who are taking on organic production and helping to develop the emerging industry.

It makes sense. The organic phenomenon is now becoming a mainstream force, no longer just a fringe fad. The organic dairy industry value last year was \$1.3 billion and the fresh fluid milk portion was half of that, at \$666 million. It appears there is a real future in organic dairy, and the future belongs to this new breed of dairy operators.

Young third-and fourth-generation dairy farmers are embracing it with clear-headed and forward-looking enthusiasm. "At first we were a bit nervous," says Jarrid, with a characteristic soft understatement. "We really didn't know what to expect." Running the operation with his father, Gary, he quickly dialed into organic management. "We found out that organic is not much different from the way most of us run our dairies anyway. We are more careful with the cows, and try to prevent problems before they get out of hand."

Organic operators forgo the tools of the conventional industry, like the standard use of antibiotics, fly sprays, and non-approved medical treatments. Preventative practices have replaced conventional treatments. "We watch the cows closely and work to keep them from getting sick," says Jarrid.

One of the biggest challenges facing organic dairy farmers is finding organic feeds. The current demand has put the squeeze on suppliers, and rising energy costs for transporting organic feed stock long distances don't help the situation. Farmers like Jarrid are already looking at lowering feed bills by optimizing the productive pastures surrounding the dairies. He is planning on boosting his grass production with more rotations and more intense management. It's refreshing to see a young operator with such an optimistic, forward-looking attitude.

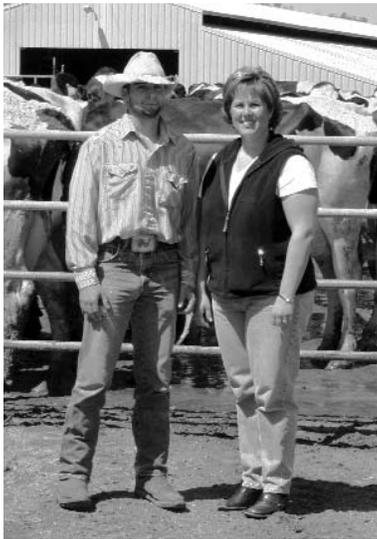


Jarrid Bordessa, a third-generation farmer, at his organic dairy in Valley Ford.

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Just down the road from Jarrid, the Diamond W Dairy spreads across the valley. This is a family farm, under the stewardship of Ken Wilson and his brother Ron Wilson, with the organic production and marketing under the management of Dayna Wilson Ghirardelli and her brother Howard.



Howard Wilson & Dayna Wilson Ghirardelli at the Diamond W Dairy Ranch in Bloomfield.

If you know anything about the dairy business, you can tell a well-run operation the minute you walk onto the farm. Clean, smoothly run, and populated by glossy fat cows who are treated like queens, the Diamond W fits the description.

The experiment in organic falls to Dayna and the cow management to Howard. Dayna's enthusiasm has helped carry the project forward. Although cautious, she is obviously excited about the introduction of organic into the longstanding family operation.

"I think we can make it with organic. We still have a lot to learn, but I can see a future in it. Organic production fits right in with how we operate. We were almost there anyway with our conventional dairy," Dayna said recently.

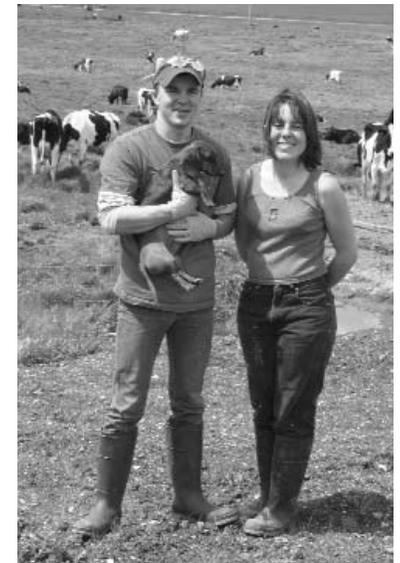
Her brother, Howard, takes care of the cows in the split herd operation. He's an authentic lifer and it shows in his quiet but intense approach to management and detail. As for the organic transition, Howard is acutely aware of a basic fact that escapes most people, "You know, organic is not that much different from the way all of us manage anyway. We take both our operations seriously, and produce good food from both." With the complex regulatory environment and escalating feed and input costs facing the industry, both Dayna and Howard are willing to experiment with the more lucrative organic production. "We are already set up to transition," says Dayna, "and we are excited to see how it turns out. The integrity involved is important to us; we work hard to meet the organic standard."

Robert McClelland and his fiancée, Jolynn Mendoza, have taken over Coopers Dairy in Bloomfield and converted it to organic. Both of these young farmers come from long-established dairy families. Like Jarrid and Dayna, Jolynn agrees that this new wave of organic dairy produc-

tion can help young farmers. "We are able to get a fair price for our milk. This gives us more room for improvements, and room to take good care of the cows," says Jolynn. They have rebuilt the milking barn and are working on the calf raising program, which is Jolynn's specialty.

Jolynn was already a skilled and sensitive manager of cow health before the organic enterprise took off. Her skills fit perfectly into the organic model. "Keeping the cows healthy is the goal. We avoid stressing the animals, and feed them simple nutritious diets of grass, hay, and organic grains. Our system is low stress; the key is prevention, prevention, prevention." This is a young crew. Robert and Jolynn have hired Jolynn's brother, Jarrod. The combined age of this crew is about the age of your average dairy farmer!

There is an optimistic energy generated by these young people that is refreshing in an industry so often challenged by steep fluctuations in pricing and an aging population of producers. These kids are not just "getting by," but are making long-range plans and commitments to their dairies. The burgeoning consumer demand and the resulting price premiums offered through organic milk production have broadened future prospects



Jolynn and Jarrod Mendoza (Robert McClelland not pictured).

for Jarrid Bordessa, Dayna Wilson Ghirardelli, her brother Howard, and Robert McClelland and Jolynn Mendoza.

Building on decades of north coast dairy experience inherited from their families, these young farmers are reaping the fruits of the efforts of generations of hard-working parents and grandparents. Organic production has given them breathing room, and more importantly, the respect and remuneration that all of our local dairies deserve. The USDA Organic Certification seal has raised the bar for producers. Signing on adds value to the product, and showcases the production of good, rich organic milk from healthy, pastured cows under careful and professional management. This is what the new consumer is demanding today. It fits perfectly into our north coast model of sustainable farming.





Organic dairy certification workshop

The price premium paid to dairy producers of organic milk is more than double that for conventional milk, and has been holding steady for the past five years. As conventional prices now descend again on the rollercoaster ride of national milk pricing, producers are taking a very serious look at transitioning their operations to organic. The Marin and Sonoma dairy industry, with its fine pastures and mid-sized herds, is well positioned to take advantage of the increased customer demand for fresh organic milk.

To help answer questions on organic certification and production, Cooperative Extension, the Marin Agricultural Commissioner's office and the Marin Agricultural Land Trust are offering a half-day workshop on ***"Certifying Your Dairy Organic" on Wednesday, May 24, 2006, from 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the Tomales History Center*** in Tomales. There is a \$10.00 donation requested.

Join us for a morning with experts on organic certification, to learn what is required to move your dairy operation over to USDA certified organic production. We will cover the basics of how to transition your dairy, help clarify the organic rule, and answer your questions. We will also have a short presentation on how to find organic feed and inputs. The presenters will be:

Stacy Carlsen - Agricultural Commissioner
Anita Sauber - Marin Organic Certified Agriculture
Ray Green - California Organic Program
Albert Straus - Straus Family Creamery
Dan Giacomini - Dairy Consultant
Elizabeth Inman - CCOF

The speakers are all experts in organic certification, and will be covering pasture and dairy certification, transition, organic feeds and inputs, replacements, and will help clarify some of the difficult-to-understand aspects of the Organic Rule for dairy operations. Coffee and light refreshments will also be provided.

Demand for organic outruns supply

Even as organic milk rides a rising wave of consumer popularity, supply shortages are plaguing retailers, leaving empty shelves and droves of unhappy customers.

Boulder, Colorado-based Organic Dairy, for example, has been allocating its milk based on previous sales and has been unable to keep up with orders.

"We are having a challenge keeping it stocked, and demand is growing across the country," said Ann Hendricks, a spokeswoman for Lakeland-based Publix.

The organic food market grew in 2004 by 20 percent, and there was a 34 percent increase in demand specifically for organic milk - driven, in part, by health-conscious consumers looking to avoid additives like bovine growth hormone. The industry sells about \$1.385 billion worth of products each year with about \$666 million, or nearly half of that revenue, coming from organic milk.

The chief hurdle for people looking to get into the game is that the process for converting from dairies to organic milk providers is lengthy: about three years, the Organic Trade Association reports.

Organic cows must be handled differently for at least a year before being certified organic. Cattle feed also must be certified organic and calves must nurse with organic milk. The association recognizes that it needs more organic milk producers to keep up with demand. *"You have to recruit more farmers, and it's not an immediate thing,"* said Barbara Haumann, the trade association's spokeswoman. But the rewards could be big. Interest in organic products grows by the day.

With organic milk, the real supply problem is that it is primarily a region-specific product that is now having to meet national demand, said Marty Mesh, director of Florida Organic Growers. *"It used to be the consumer voted with their dollar - buying organic foods was a reward to farmers for doing the right thing. Now, they are doing it for their own reasons, for health reasons,"* Mesh said.

Excerpted from - Devona Walker, Sarasota Herald-Tribune, 28 Mar 2006



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Close to home here in the Marin-Sonoma foodshed, the most energizing news is coming from a growing handful of young, third-and fourth-generation dairy farmers, who are embracing the organic opportunity in the dairy industry. The organic milk shelf in specialty and even mainstream stores has become the darling of the retail dairy section. Once a "loss leader," dairy has become energized by intense consumer demand for not only organic fluid milk, but for processed products as well. Store shortages are common.

The cautious optimism, focused excitement, and quiet courage that surround the small group of young farmers featured in this issue of Grown in Marin is infectious. These men and women are looking forward to landscapes that some thought were receding. They possess a sound vision rooted in sensible agricultural practice, combined with economic savvy and balanced idealism. Going against the current takes endurance and skill, and these young folks have plenty of both. These are not starry-eyed dreamers, but individuals with a real sense of their own personal worth and place in the world. After all, it is their world to inherit and take care of.

- Steve Quirt, Editor

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Editors: Steve Quirt & Ellie Rilla
Production: Frances Healey



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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

- ☞ **Cooperative Extension**, with its partners the **Marin Food Systems Project** and **Marin Organic**, has received a grant from the **UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program** to connect school food service directors with local farmers and get more fresh food into schools.
- ☞ **Stream Restoration Success: Monitoring for Project Performance and Management**, will be held **Friday, July 7, 2006, 8:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. at Luchessi Center, Petaluma FEE: \$30.00** RSVP to **Kathy Perry** at (707) 565-2621 (ksperry@ucdavis.edu). Do not hesitate to contact **David Lewis** (djlewis@ucdavis.edu) or **Michael Lennox** (mlelnox@ucdavis.edu) with questions.
- ☞ The new **Marin Sun Farms Eatery** is due to open by the end of **May**. **Indian Peach** will be taking charge of prepared food there. The retail meat case has been expanded and more local farm fresh products will be available. The facility has undergone flood cleanup and a complete overhaul, including a 15-foot community dining table.
- ☞ **The Marin French Cheese Company** won honors as the **World's Best Brie** with its **Boyces Rouge et Noir Triple Creme Brie** at the **World Cheese Awards in London**. This is the first time an American Company has earned the award.
- ☞ **Warren Weber** of **Star Route Farms in Bolinas** announced the signature organic vegetable farm is beginning the transition to **solar power** with its first installation of solar panels. Warren also said that the farm is "**only ten days behind schedule**" due to the cool, wet spring.

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