

Locally Grown Meet the Milk Farmers

Farm-fresh foods move to the cutting edge with the first local milk in a biodegradable bottle

Dan and Barbara Rice were milking about 80 cows on their small dairy farm in southeast Pennsylvania when they were offered the opportunity to move to Firth, Nebraska in 1998 to join the Obbink Family Dairy. The partnership worked so well they purchased the property across the road and built a new dairy. Today, the Obbink and Rice families have joined with the Kyser, Goosen, and Eickhoff families to pool their resources, talents, and cows together and produce the best quality milk nature has to offer.

Each family plays a vital part in the success of the operation. Dan Rice is the general manager and dairy promotion advocate. David Obbink is in charge of the feeding and his brother Cliff Obbink oversees crop production and shop maintenance. Steve Keiser manages the herd. Andy and Mike Goosen raise the young heifers and the Eickhoff family raises the bull calves. Recently they added a compost operation where Dan's dad finds himself helping out so much he is no longer retired. Dan says that it is great to be part of a team because now he has backup so he can attend his kids' baseball games and school events. "I feel I am able to have a better balanced life."

These farm families joined together in order to continue to do the work they love – dairy farming. They stay true to their farming heritage; respecting the land, the environment, and the well-being of the animals. Dan explained that they do not use any hormones or sub-therapeutic antibiotics. "We don't dock our cows' tails and we let them roam free in our open style dairy barns," Dan said. "We treat every cow as if it were our only cow. The health and well-being of our cows is our top priority."

All young heifers are raised on pasture for the first two years, until they are bred. When they start to produce milk they are moved to a free-style barn, which is basically a barn with a top and no sides. Here the cows move about freely and socialize with one another, are fed silage (hay and grain), have fresh clean water and clean dry stalls to lie down in. Three times a day the cows walk to the milking parlor. Dan said that milking three times a day makes the cow more comfortable and reduces the incidences of infection. In addition to monitoring the volume of milk each cow produces, each cow wears a pedometer on its leg so they can be monitored to make sure they are walking sufficiently to ensure good health. If a cow is not walking enough, then it is checked to see if it is not feeling well. If a cow is sick it is separated to the 'sick barn' until it is well. At the end of the cows' milk producing cycle, they are moved to the pasture to rest-up for the next cycle. Most commercial dairy cows are only milked for five years; "we have some cows that are 10 to 15 years old," Dan boasts proudly.

Good Natured Family Farms milk comes from 180 selected cows. The milk from this select group of cows is transported in a tanker truck to Naturally Iowa dairy processing plant in Clarinda, Iowa, about an hour away. This small state of the art dairy processing plant is the vision of Bill Horner and Steve Williamson. Bill explained "we start with the highest quality milk and we use a special cold separation process that does not destroy the milk body. We pasteurize our milk at a lower temperature and this helps

protect the flavor.” We also have an in-house laboratory that monitors the Good Natured Family Farm milk quality all the way through the process. What Bill is most excited about is the new earth friendly milk bottle. They make their own biodegradable milk bottles at the processing plant. While plastic milk bottles can take hundreds of years to decompose, the corn bottle is compostable in 100 days. The Good Natured Family Farm milk bottles are lighter and more efficient to transport than the old glass ones. Also the opaque color protects the milk from light which can cause the breakdown of vital nutrients and alter the milk flavor.

Good Natured Family Farms milk is milk you can feel good about – and now you can feel good about the milk bottle too.

Photo caption: Dan, Brenda, Emily, Sam, and Ben Rice