

Thinking About Selling Raw Milk?

It's easier than you think.

By Fay Benson

It has always been the norm for dairy farmers and their families to drink milk right from the tank. In fact I've never known any farmer that hasn't drunk raw milk. My father, as well as many other farmers, would allow certain neighbors to buy milk from the farm. It was always understood that it was not something you advertised, and the box for the milk money was kept in a discrete place where inquiring eyes (milk inspector) didn't see it, because there are state regulations covering not only the sale of raw milk but also the giving away of it.

A number of different issues have stirred interest in drinking raw milk:

- Buying locally. People are concerned with the source of their food, plus they can't see shipping milk back and forth across the state so they want to buy it direct from the farm.
- Health reasons. There are books that stress the damage that pasteurization does to milk, and recommend that consumers drink raw milk for health reasons.
- Organic. With more and more dairy farms receiving their organic certification, consumers find they can buy organic milk at the farm for 1/3 the price they would pay in the store.

THE NYS REGULATIONS

The first part of this article won't weigh in on these issues, but will attempt to explain the New York State regulations concerning the sale of raw milk from the farm.

I contacted Bill Fredricks, State Milk Inspector for the Central NY area. He explained that every dairy farm must have a permit to ship raw milk. This raw milk is labeled "pre-pasteurized," meaning that it will be pasteurized or processed and will not reach the consumer in the raw form. But there is an addendum to this permit. It states that if a producer ships less than 3000 lbs/month, a permit is not required to ship raw milk.

That would be the production of approximately 2 cows or I don't know how many sheep or goats. This milk is considered to be the same as pre-pasteurized and is not to reach the consumer in its raw form.

This addendum is the source of some confusion. Some producers feel that they can sell up to 3000 lbs. from their farm and are not covered by the permit process. However the exemption is meant for families with 1-2 cows that want to ship their raw milk for processing into cheese or some other non-raw product. Mr. Fredricks advised me to get a copy of Ag & Markets Circular 958 which lists the regulations concerning production, processing and distribution of milk in NY State. (Call Milk Control & Dairy Services 4518-457-1772 to request this pamphlet.)

I also contacted Professor David Brown at Cornell's Dept. of Food Science for help in interpreting the regulations. He explained that there is a permit which allows you to sell raw milk directly to consumers. The producer is required to obtain a "Raw Milk Sales Part 2" permit. Even if the farmer gives away one gallon of milk, a permit is required. To receive a permit the farmer must have:

- A Brucellosis ring test on file with Animal Industry, a department within NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets.
- A TB test performed on each animal.
- The permittee must be enrolled in the

Quality Milk Production Services (QMPS) program and must have a report showing that each animal was tested for pathogens, including but not limited to Staph. aureus and E. coli.

- The permittee must have a milk sample tested for the following pathogens: Salmonella, Listeria, Escherchia coliform, E. coli 0157:H7, and Staphylococci. These tests are required initially and monthly.
- A satisfactory farm water test needs to be on file.



Looking for a niche market that will add value to your milk? Selling raw milk might work for you. It takes a lot of work and there are risks but if you have a consumer base close by it can pay dividends. Photographer: Fay Benson

These are the requirements for raw cow milk. There are some additional requirements for raw goat's or sheep's milk.

A PRODUCER'S PERSPECTIVE ON SELLING RAW MILK

"The licensing may sound complicated, like any licensing procedure, but it really is no big deal, aside from seeing the milk inspectors on your farm every month."

This was the reply I got when I contacted Steve and Barb Smith of Lodi, NY. The Smiths have operated Meadowsweet Farm since 1996. It presently is home to Steve and Barb, 3 of their 6 children, 5-10 jersey cows and their daughters, and a motley crew of other farm animals. They produce yogurt, kefir, and raw milk cheese, and they have a NY Ag & Market permit to sell raw milk. The hard products they can sell at various locations around Ithaca but the raw milk can only be sold from their milk tank on their farm.

The Smiths consider themselves lucky since many states outlaw the selling of raw milk. Even though NY has a permit process there are only about 10 of the permits issued across the state. The Smiths found the task of obtaining a raw milk permit a bit daunting because the regulations contained in Circular 958 Part 2 are written in "legalese," and finding the portions that pertain to the raw milk permit was difficult, almost by design they felt.

According to the Smiths, "A Brucellosis ring test must be done and on file, but it's our understanding that if you ship milk, the plant you ship to does the test and does the filing. We have had our vet do the testing and the State reimbursed her. She did every cow but we now know that only a bulk tank ring test is required." The TB test is NOT required, they said, as NY is an accredited or modified accredited tuberculosis-free area as determined by the USDA.

State lab checks for the destroyed enzymes to be sure the milk was properly pasteurized. It is these destroyed enzymes that some feel is the lost health benefit that raw milk will give the consumers.

The Smiths like to promote the concept of "terroir," currently being discussed in farming circles. This is the idea that products from one herd or farm are unique and cannot be duplicated anywhere else. In other words, the milk from their herd is unique because of the particular constellation of factors that make up their farm environment (soil type, mineral profile, location on the earth, climate, vegetation pattern, genetic background of their animals).

"The milk from our farm has a unique taste, as will the products made from our milk. This concept of unique regional identity, so familiar to wine and cheese connoisseurs, needs to be promoted to customers," says Barb.

CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS

Even Raw milk opponents acknowledge that refrigeration, improved handling practices, and testing equipment have made today's raw milk supplies far cleaner and safer than ever before. Even with the new technology the milk can't be any healthier than when it leaves the cow. That's why the Smiths emphasize their low stress environment for their cows, along with a natural diet high in grasses and keeping the cows clean. These practices go a long way in starting out with a healthy product.

If dairy farmers wonder how healthy their milk is, the Smiths suggest testing raw milk quality by determining if the milk will survive for 14 days in the refrigerator without "going sour".

THE BOTTOM LINE

"We have found it VERY profitable, with folks coming to us from as far away as Buffalo and even Canada," says Barb. "I would like to see this information get out to dairy farmers who need all the help they can get and we should not let some intimidating regulations get in the way of doing business. Incidentally, our raw milk sells for \$4.50 per gallon in the customer's own container. And many customers have told us that price is too low."

For more information on raw milk you can visit the Weston A. Price Foundation web site at www.realmilk.org. For NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets milk regulations information visit www.agmkt.state.ny.us/DI/DIHome.html.

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As for the other requirements, Steve says, "QMPS is required and we get them out here annually. It's a very informative service and not very expensive. The Divisions of Milk Control samples our milk monthly and does the pathogen testing. They also do a farm inspection every month. That is the main drawback to the permit. Most dairies have never seen a state inspector and the raw milk permit brings a State inspector to your farm every month. The water testing needs to be on a 6-month cycle, and all raw milk must be sold on farm."

WHY RAW?

Raw milk's most active supporter is the Weston A. Price Foundation in Washington, D.C., an educational organization that promotes "nutrient-dense foods." According to its web site, www.realmilk.org, raw milk has built-in compounds – antibodies, helpful bacteria, and enzymes – that provide natural protection from harmful pathogens. Furthermore, pasteurization changes enzymes, some of which are essential in the absorption of other nutrients, says foundation president Sally Fallon.

According to the Smiths, the breakdown of these enzymes is how the State typically tests milk used for yogurt and kefir. The law requires the milk to be pasteurized before production of both products. The

