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One Small Dairy in a Big Dairy World

Friday, December 4, 2009

By Mary Hawkins

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(GH: Mary Hawkins of [Northwest Public Radio](#) interviews Trish Vieira, a small dairy owner in Spokane who got into the business out of frustration with the dairy industry itself. Vieira says most milk is so processed “it comes to you white and liquid and that’s about the only resemblance it has to milk anymore.”)



Host intro: “Spokane’s Family Farm” dairy is working to bring clean, unadulterated milk to the Inland Northwest. Mary Hawkins reports why “Spokane’s Family Farm” might be considered a revolutionary dairy operation on “Our Northwest Economy”:

Mary Hawkins: Mike and Trish Vieira come from generations of hard-working dairy farmers. They used to operate in the Moses Lake, Othello, Yakima region where they were members of the Darigold cooperative. While they didn’t get rich, they had a steady cash flow and were consistently considered top quality producers. However, the Vieras decided to strike out on their own in order to have the kind of business they could be proud of. They moved to Spokane and now they pasteurize and bottle their own product. They chose Spokane because it’s a big enough market to support a small family dairy. They brought 30 cows when their plant was ready and began milking them in April. While they want to make a living, the Vieras are more concerned with the integrity and health of their product. One of the reasons they became

independent is because they couldn’t stand the idea of their milk being pooled with milk from farmers who weren’t as clean:

Trish Vieira: It’s really hard when you do a really good job and you work really hard at it to see it just get dumped with the rest of it so that’s one of the reasons. [and] The other reason is the processing and what happens to the milk before it gets back to the consumer – it changes the milk components so much that it’s no longer healthy, nor is it hardly any longer milk. The only thing that it does retain is that it originally came from a cow somewhere.

Hawkins: Most organic and conventional milk goes through several processes. Milk is pasteurized, which simply means that it is quickly heated to a temperature that will kill pathogens. Lots of milk now goes through an “ultra-pasteurization” method, which heats it to a very high temperature, around 280 degrees Fahrenheit for a fraction of a second. This process not only kills pathogens, it greatly extends shelf life. At Spokane’s Family Dairy, they are less aggressive in their pasteurization: they heat their milk to 145 degrees Fahrenheit. This means that the milk is much closer to its natural state.

Viera: ...so our milk comes from the cow in its raw form, goes through the pasteurizer the very next day, so it’s very quick. It’s pasteurized for safety only – so everything else good is left in there – and then it goes through the bottler. We don’t take the cream and integrate it so that it won’t leave the milk...

Hawkins: They do not homogenize their milk. Trish Viera argues that homogenization alters the milk product and inhibits the body’s ability to digest it. In fact, she says that milk products now are so adulterated that they contribute to atherosclerosis and obesity partly because our bodies treat milk products as irritants instead of as nutritious foods. She goes as far as saying most milk has very little food value.

Viera: Cows only produce cream and skim. That’s it. No two percent. No one percent. You know it’s almost like – it comes to you white and liquid and that’s about the only resemblance it has to milk anymore.

Hawkins: Much of today’s milk has a very long shelf life because it is so sterile. It’s a commodity that is shipped over long distances and can last for months. Dairies don’t have to be as fastidious as the Vieras’ because their milk is highly processed anyway.

Viera: You get good shelf life for two reasons: low bacteria and refrigeration. You also get quality with low bacteria. So if you got a lot of bacteria you GOTTA boil the heck out of it to make sure it sticks. You watch your bacteria counts then you have quality and you have long shelf life. Ours is three weeks, and that is an excellent shelf life – I mean our raw milk would last that long. Our raw milk is very clean.

Hawkins: It’s their cleanliness that sets this family dairy apart. Cows are not naturally clean animals, especially when they are confined for any length of time. They defecate where they eat. So it’s a big job keeping their Holsteins clean. The Vieras clean their cows, and turn their waste into the ground several times every day where it composts naturally.

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Like most dairy people, the Vieiras love their cows. Because they breed and raise their cows, they control the cow's feed and are hyper-vigilant about their health. They are proud of their low "somatic" or white cell count. They keep that number low by maintaining clean, healthy, happy animals. Which brings us to why they are NOT planning to go organic any time soon. When one of her cows gets sick, Trish Vieira wants to reserve the ability to treat her...

Vieira: We don't put them in the same realm as people, but on the other hand, you've had her for eleven years or ten years, you're not real excited about not giving her an antibiotic when she has a horrible problem because if you lose her, it's a big deal. I have cows out here that are 11, 12 years old. They've been with us a long time. Some of 'em produce a hundred pounds a day...that's a lot of milk.

Hawkins: In order for cows to produce optimally, high quality feed is crucial. The Vieira's have a history of very productive cows: one of them attained the position of 25th in the nation for milk production. Unfortunately when times are tough, dairies will often skimp on feed - which can be very hard on the animals.

Vieira: They're like a marathon runner - all the time quietly running a marathon and if you don't give them their Gatorade they are going to tip over - I mean tip over and die - they have to have a ration with their grain and their mixed hays that will keep them upright so that you're not treating cows with antibiotics every day for mastitis, for stomach issues or because they are "unthrifty" because of their feed. [If you have] 50 thousand cows, you don't care. You just pop them with an antibiotic.

Hawkins: Spokane Family Farms hopes that other dairy farmers make choice to "jump out of the pool" to provide clean quality local milk.

Vieira: We think that local trumps organic all the way around.

Hawkins: It's been a tough year for the dairy industry and futures aren't looking extremely bright. But Spokane's Family Farm dairy seems to be finding a clientele willing to pay a little more for their product. For more information about the dairy industry and this family dairy, go to Our Northwest at n-w-p-r dot org. I'm Mary Hawkins.

Links:

Northwest Public Radio's "Our Northwest" website

[Spokane's Family Farm](#) website

At ProCon.org, [arguments for and against homogenization of milk](#):

While Spokane's Family Farm DOES pasteurize, this organization is a proponent of raw milk: [Raw Milk dot org](#).

Here's a report released this month on the dairy industry, where organic dairies are becoming big business in the west: [Characteristics, Costs, and Issues for Organic Dairy Farming](#)

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