

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Cream of the Crop: Lifeline Farm Adds Milk and Cheese To Its Farm Products Available Locally

By Rod Daniel, Photo By Jeremy Lurgio

A Victor, Montana dairyman has made it easier for people to enjoy the taste of fresh milk, and in the process he's brought back a bit of Bitterroot Valley history.

Two decades after starting a certified organic dairy west of Victor, Ernie Harvey commenced production at his new grade-A milk bottling facility less than a mile away. But the Victor bottling plant - the first to receive a state license in more than 20 years - is only part of what's new at Lifeline Community Creamery. Certified organic cheese has been produced there since August.

Bucking an American trend that's seen corporate agriculture swallow up small farm ventures like dogs eating butter, the new creamery rekindles a proud tradition in a valley that once was home to more than a hundred dairies producing milk for creameries from Grantsdale to Stevensville.

A Dillon native, Harvey started the dairy at Lifeline Farm in 1984 to help complete the soil-fertility cycle on west-side land that was producing up to 80 acres of organic produce. In the dairy's first two years, Lifeline sold milk to the Ravalli County Creamery in Hamilton, which at the time bought from 30 area dairy farmers and produced cheese, ice cream and milk under the Hamilton House label.

The Huls family closed the Ravalli County Creamery in August 1985 when owner Dave Huls died tragically in an automobile accident. Since then the Bitterroot Valley has been without a milk-bottling plant or cheese-making facility and the number of dairies in the valley has shrunk to less than 10.

As the only certified organic dairy in a valley where

all the dairies sell to Darigold in Bozeman, Lifeline found it hard to make a profit buying higher-priced organic feed and selling milk at commercial prices. Harvey said they tried selling their grade-A organic milk to different processing plants who could pay higher prices, but each plant eventually closed.

"Initially, we wanted someone else to do the processing," he said, "but after going through five plant closures, I decided I'd either have to do this myself or get out of the business. It was pretty much a last-ditch effort."

Building and equipping a modern-day creamery is a costly endeavor, but Harvey was able to finance the project by selling many of the farm's breeding heifers as well as its milk base - the right to produce milk in Montana at a certain base price.

"We didn't need the milk base to produce ourselves," he said, "and local producers could use it."

Harvey wanted to locate the creamery as close to the farm as possible, so he approached Victor Mercantile owner Ray Daguerra, who subsequently built the 30,000-square-foot creamery building just north of his grocery store, completing it last fall.

Most of the plant's equipment is reconditioned, including the stainless steel cheese vat and the bottling machine. But the computerized, "high-temperature-short-time" pasteurizer is new.

Currently, Harvey said, about a third of the milk from the dairy's 70 Brown Swiss cows - roughly 500 gallons per week - is bottled and the remaining two-thirds gets made into cheese. In the next few months, after establishing a market for the fresh milk, he hopes to be bottling close to 2,000 gallons per week.

"Right now we're just getting it up and running," he said. "It's out there now and it's selling. In the next few months we should be in three or four times as many stores as we are now."

One advantage of putting the surplus, grade-A milk into cheese, he said, is that it increases in value while sitting on pallets in the 40-degree walk-in cooler.



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"Right now, our coolers are full of 40-pound boxes of cheese," he said. "And really that's money in the bank. The mild cheddar will gain 20 percent in value in six months as it ages and becomes sharp, and another 20 percent in six more months for extra sharp."

Harvey has been making and marketing certified organic cheese for about five years. Until August 2003, Harvey trucked his milk to a cheese plant near Bozeman, where third-generation cheesemakers Duane and Darryl Heap artfully turned the organic milk into handcrafted jack and cheddar.

Getting the bottling operation up and running, Harvey said, has taken a lot of time and energy, due in part to the thorough series of inspections required by the state.

Todd Gahagan, bureau chief for the Milk and Egg Inspection Division of the Department of Livestock, said there are very stern requirements for a grade-A bottling plant, including regular inspections to make sure the pasteurizing and bottling equipment is working properly.

"We take food safety very seriously," Gahagan said. "There are a large number of requirements that have to be met before they're allowed to sell bottled milk, and we do a very rigorous inspection every three months."

Since Lifeline milk isn't homogenized - a process that breaks down the molecules of fat - a layer of cream floats on top of the milk. For that reason, Harvey recommends vigorously shaking the jug of milk before opening in order to distribute the cream.

He said just about everyone who has tried the new milk has liked the old-fashioned, rich taste.

"We've had nothing but very good reviews," he said. "A lot of people remember old-fashioned milk with cream on top and like the flavor. Ultra-pasteurization really screws up the taste, I think."

The fact that the milk is bottled and shipped often the same day it's produced, means that under ideal circumstances a consumer can buy milk that literally was still in the cow the day before. Such incredible freshness, Harvey said, gives them a leg up on the competition.

Lifeline Farm, in addition to producing milk and cheese, also sells certified organic beef, pork and sausage, and Harvey's partners Luci Brieger and Steve Elliott of Lifeline Produce grow and sell organic vegetables. Harvey said it was never their intention to produce a high-priced product for an elitist market, and the fact that their milk is finally making it to regular grocery store shelves fits in with their philosophy.

"We've always taken a populist bent," Harvey said. "Our farm is producing for the general public. We

don't want to sell a little bit of product for high bucks; we want to sell a lot of product at a reasonable price."

Harvey said that was the idea behind the "family packs" of organic cheese introduced three years ago. After successfully marketing the smaller, 8-ounce packages of jack and cheddar cheeses, Lifeline added the more economical 24-oz family packs.

"I think we were the first people in the organic market to offer the larger sizes," he said. "Family packs are two-thirds of the market now. It shows that common people want to eat organic, but it's got to fit into their budget."

Once the bottling and milk distribution is running smoothly, Harvey's next task is to make cultured, organic butter from the fledgling Victor creamery. He already has the commercial butter churn, but hasn't had time yet to get it going.

Eventually, his goal is to have a complete farm store in the same building as the creamery, where consumers can choose from the wide selection of organic farm products from not only Lifeline Farm but other area organic farms as well.

With the help of the many people associated with Lifeline Farm, Harvey has spent the better part of the last 30 years nourishing the people in his community. And judging by his most recent accomplishment, he's no less committed today to his belief that good food feeds a person's soul than when he started growing vegetables on Sweathouse Creek Road in the late-1970s.

But laced in Harvey's earthy belief in the power of soul food is a pragmatism grounded in reality.

"Meat and milk both show a direct reflection to their source that can be measured in quality, taste and how you feel when you eat them," he said. "You can take a drink of milk and right away tell the quality. The other side is if you have a generation raised on skim or powdered milk, they're not going to know the difference."

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