

Organic Production

Feature Farm

Wright Way Dairy George and Linda Wright Russell, NY

by *Liz Bawden, NODPA*
Co-Editor and State Representative

Just 30 miles from the Canadian border, George and Linda Wright have been shipping milk from their farm in Russell, New York since 1996. Originally from Vermont, George had left his family dairy farm to pursue other career paths and Linda worked in the manufacturing of medical equipment. Linda had never milked a cow until their purchased cows began to arrive in 1996!

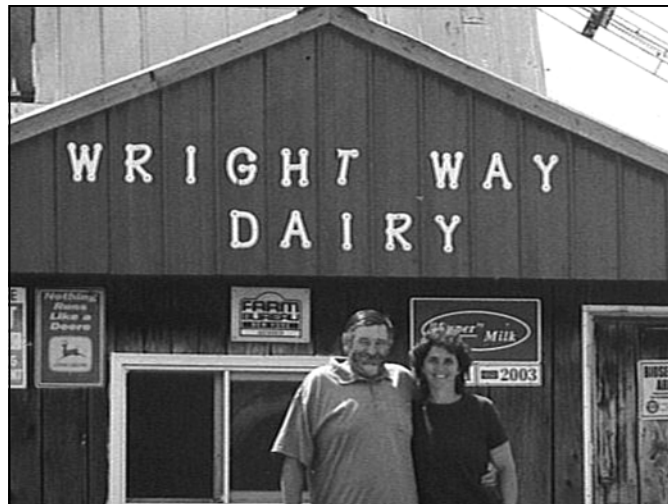
The Wrights own 690 acres; 290 tillable, 100 pasture, and 300 wooded. They also lease 115 tillable acres and 12 acres of pasture. They are Horizon Organic independent shippers and like it that way. George says, "We are still looking for a co-op that really wants to work for farmers". George and Linda work the farm together, having some hired help "when they can get it".

Certified by NOFA-NY in 2000, their farm was already certifiable. Their biggest challenge at that time was the availability of organic grain. George remembers, "at that time, if you could find organic grain, it was poor quality and the choices were slim". Transitioning to organic had been originally a financial decision. Tired of "working for nothing" and losing equity with conventional milk, the Wrights were ready to make a change. And they never looked back. "When we went full organic, it all changed. We are now enjoying our farm more than we

thought was possible."

The Wrights milk an average of 50 cows, housed in a stanchion barn. Average production runs 15,000 to 17,000 pounds depending on the grazing season and crop quality. "We do not believe in feeding more grain to make up for poor quality feed".

The pasturing season usually begins in early May when the cows are turned out onto 30 acres of pasture. As first cut hay is harvested from the fields, the cows are fenced off, and the pasture rotation begins. This provides 120 acres of grazing for 50 cows. Eventually the home farm is completely pastured. At this point, George and Linda let the cows "rotate themselves" over



*George and Linda Wright, Wright Way Dairy (above)
Their grazing cows (below)*



the farm. Cows are on pasture day and night from May to November. They graze 100% of their forage from about May 15 to about Oct 1. Before and after that time, cows are fed baleage to supplement the pasture. A custom grain mix is fed at both milkings; the amount is determined by production and body condition.

In the winter, they process baleage in a vertical mixer. Salt, bicarb. and minerals are added to the mix. Grain is top-dressed at 8 to 20 lbs per day, depending on milk production and body condition. They do their own ration balancing, and feel that they have improved overall cow health by not pushing for production.

George and Linda have a strong vaccination program. They use a 10-way vaccine on the milking herd and bred heifers in spring and fall. Open heifers and calves are vaccinated with Titanium 5. Cows are vaccinated with a E. coli-calf scour vaccine at dry-off to prevent later problems with calf scours. They use a foot rot vaccine in the spring with a booster in August. And they are pleased with the results of some

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mastitis vaccines; they feel it has helped them to have relatively few cases of mastitis per year, and maintain their SCC level at 150,000 to 250,000 for the last 5 years. Endovac-Bovi is used to control E. coli mastitis and salmonella; Lysigan controls staph mastitis. Both are administered every 6 months, but at staggered times, at least 10 days apart from each other or any other vaccinations. George stresses the need to use a new, clean needle for every injection every time to avoid spreading disease. Although they feel that animal health improved greatly after changing to organic production, they still feel they rely heavily on their veterinarian for diagnosis of health problems that arise. "If you don't know exactly what you are treating you can't know for sure how to treat it. We try to have our vet in at least every 6 or 8 weeks for pregnancy checks so he doesn't forget where we are because otherwise we wouldn't see him too often". The Wrights feel fortunate to have a vet that is supportive of organics, and works with them in ways that are compatible with organic standards.

While they only have a couple of mastitis cases each year, at the first sign of a hard quarter, they administer 3 aspirin twice a day. "We've found that if we do this at the first sign, it rarely develops into mastitis." If it does develop into mastitis, they strip the quarter several times a day, give aspirin, and rub liniment (they use a Crystal Creek product called Linirub) on the quarter. If all else fails, the quarter is dried off. The Wrights cull problem cows, and keep a (mostly) young herd.

Calf health is good at Wright Way Dairy too. Grain and hay are offered at 2 to 3 days of age. Calves are weaned from the 3 to 4 quarts of milk at each feeding at about 3 months. Calves are vaccinated at weaning and given a booster the following month. Fresh air and fresh water are key to good calf health.

The herd is closed except for the introduction of a service bull now and then. Usually, they prefer to buy a bull calf from a good herd and raise them for breeding.

When asked about the future of the organic dairy industry, George is outspoken, and he pulls no punches. He is adamant that the USDA must enforce the organic rules. And those rules must be clarified; they need to put the pasture policy in place as well as the "last third" rule governing dairy replacements. "It's appalling that they let Aurora Dairy get away with 14 "willful" violations with no significant penalties or loss of certification! This is a slap in the face to every organic dairy farmer in the country that is following the rules." George identifies the need for a level playing field for all certified organic producers, regardless of size and political clout. He also sees that organic certifiers need

to be monitored more closely, since Aurora's certifying agency, the Colorado Dept of Agriculture, allowed these violations.

George is also the founder of the e-mail group called OMILK, an internet list serve for organic dairy farmers only. For information on joining the list serve, contact George Wright at wrightwaydairy@yahoo.com or go to OMILK@yahoogroups.com and sign up. ♦

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