




# what price milk?

text and photos by abby luby

**f**rom a large window in their office, once a farmhouse, Ronnie and Rick Osofsky survey their Ancramdale dairy farm. Their view is a vista of rolling hills unfurling into deep gullies—the idyllic terrain of the Catskill and Berkshire Mountains. All around them flows a steady stream of non-stop work; in the barn, 100 prizewinning Holsteins are milked twice a day and bed down on hay-covered mattresses in the winter. Adjacent buildings house stainless steel tanks, a maze of pipes, bottling machines and a plethora of assorted gauges and valves—all essential for the production of Ronnybrook's Creamline™ milk, yogurt, ice cream, butter and other dairy products.



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if you don't  
treat them with  
care and respect.

The brothers and their families are doing what they learned to do as children—run a successful small, family dairy farm, despite an oppressive government price structure and sometimes-illogical regulations.

The farm, established in 1941 by their parents, is expansive—800 acres total—and it could be the very definition of a “family” farm. The two main doors to the office building open and close frequently, ushering in Ronnybrook staff along with third-generation Osofskys—Daniel, the farm manager; Kate, the financial controller; Peter, head of distribution; and Denice, the farm’s

purchasing manager. (Also running around but not yet on the payroll are six grandchildren, ages 2 to 13.) Even the bovines milked there 70 years ago are related to the current Ronnybrook herd.

“From their great grandmother on down, we know the lineage of every cow,” says Ronnie, a burly man with soft brown eyes. “The only difference is we use the semen from different bulls. Did you know that only 50 bulls breed almost all of the 12 million Holstein dairy cows in the country? Those bulls are tired but happy,” he chuckles.

Joking around is part of what keeps the Osofskys

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active and able to manage 50 employees through the long, 17-hour days. Growing up on the farm helped develop the brothers' keen insights into the cows' nature and instilled in them a strong sense of entrepreneurship that ultimately made Ronnybrook a household name in Hudson Valley grocery stores, Manhattan Greenmarkets and about 150 retail locations throughout the Metro area. As Ronnybrook products became more widely distributed, they've become synonymous with buzzwords like "fresh" and "local."

Since 1982, the Osofskys have seen the disappearance of at least 35 farms within a 10-mile radius. Mandated regulations for dairy farmers and government control of milk prices have forced many farmers to quit the business. "As a dairy farmer, all you think about is the more milk you make, the more money you are going to have," Rick explains. "If milk is cheap, the farmer has to sell a lot more milk to survive, which means milking more cows. So what happens? You create a surplus and the price of milk continues to fall until it is so low that some farmers can't survive and are forced out of business." The frustrating cycle of supply-and-demand boomerangs from one extreme to another. Farmers abandoning the business create a milk shortage, which forces milk prices to rise; as prices rise, farmers milk more cows to make more money, creating another surplus and falling prices.

The plight of the small farmer struggling to carve out a niche market while competing with the ag-industry power brokers is nothing new to the Osofskys. Compared to the industrial animal factories, or CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), where cows are just numbers, Ronnybrook is less a dairy farm and more a cow haven where each cow is cared for individually and each is given a name. The Osofskys say that naming cows makes the animals happy and is good for milk production. (A paper published in the British research journal *Anthrozoos: A*



*Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People & Animals*, (Vol. 22, No. 1, March 2009) supports claims that cows give more milk if they have a name.) "We talk to the cows all day long," Rick says. "We ask, 'How you doing this morning, Linda?' We check them out and make sure they're not hurt or ill."

Generally, farmers with larger herds surgically embed a computer chip in their cows that allows them to monitor their health status remotely, a practice Rick and Ronnie refuse to do. Rick claims that a 100-cow herd is manageable on a human level. "There's a certain ethic that comes with growing up with cows. It has to do with who you are," he says. "We don't think farmers who have 10,000 cows treat them as we can treat our 100 cows. You won't have your cows very long if you don't treat them with care and respect."

Part of nurturing Ronnybrook cows means letting them graze freely in pastures. It also means not using recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBST) to get more milk out of the cow. "Early on, [rBST] was interesting to a lot of farmers—for \$2 you could inject a cow and she could give 10 percent more milk," Rick recalls. "You poke the cow every milking—twice a day. Initially, farmers were totally intrigued by the result and many of them jumped on the bandwagon." But the Osofskys didn't.

"Studies have shown that you are milking them at a really accelerated pace," Ronnie notes. "Normally, cows



# RICK OSOFSKY on...

## REGULATION...

[There were] lots of cow barns in New York on the Hudson River, in fact, down around 14th Street, where the Meatpacking district is. Breweries were down there too, and they needed a way to get rid of all the brewers' grain. They decided that one of the ways would be to have cows come in and consume it and then produce milk so it could be distributed immediately—there was still no refrigeration.

It really didn't help a whole lot, because they traded in brewers' grain for cow manure—it was probably worse.

Anyway, they ultimately closed down all of those barns and they started producing milk up along the Hudson River. As long as your farm was located near a railroad or a river, you could ship your milk to New York in a day on ice and be cold. But if you were up in the mountains in Northern New York, you couldn't, and had to go into butter and cheese and non-fluid products.

All the stuff that was used for fluid was called Grade A milk, and all the stuff that was used [for] butter or cheese had no rating at all. That distinction still exists today. [Ed note: Milk destined for non-fluid use is currently labeled Grade B.] The production of [Grade A] milk [is] highly regulated; butter is not, cheeses are not. You can make cheese or butter anyplace, and with very little inspections being done. You can only make milk, however, in a Grade A plant that's got to be inspected all the time.

We make farmer's cheese exactly the same way we make Greek yogurt. But yogurt's a Grade A product—even

though we consider yogurt a solid product, Washington considers it a fluid product because the way yogurt used to be was really very sloppy and you could drink it. I would not consider it a Grade A [product], but they do. The point being, I can't make yogurt in the same fashion I make farmer's cheese. It doesn't make any sense, does it? The inspector doesn't care what we do with cheese; doesn't care what we do with butter.

We're filled with those stories. There's an awful lot of people out there enforcing rules that really don't make a whole lot of sense. [The rules] are 60, or 70, or 80 years old.

## HOMOGENIZATION...

In the '50s, when they went from glass to gable-topped, cardboard boxes, milk sales really plummeted. I think it was as much people not wanting to buy milk in a box—and people struggled with those original gable-topped boxes—but there was also this layer of cream of top of the container [and] you couldn't [use] a spoon to get it out, you couldn't really mix it up. Anyway, milk sales really plummeted. All these issues and the fact that it was in a different container drove the industry to do something. And they decided that "We'll just homogenize milk."

If you look at milk under a microscope, milk fats are huge globules—they look like amoebas floating around in some fluid. With homogenization, you pulverize the milk fats so they stay in suspension. It's all still there, it's just now all become a homogenous mass. People have become used to this very clear, clean product.

But what happened—and there have been numerous studies done—milk fats are to be digested in the intestines. It's a very slow process. When you homogenize milk and pulverize all the fat, the milk is absorbed directly from the stomach and into the blood stream. That was never the way that it evolved—it's almost toxic, it's not made to go there. Milk has been transformed into a different product and the body doesn't really know how to use it.

People would come to us with children who were clearly lactose intolerant, or so they thought. They'd drink our un-homogenized milk and they had no adverse [reaction] at all. They attributed it to the fact that we had fresh milk and our cows were fed and treated differently, but in reality they were not necessarily lactose intolerant, they were just reacting to homogenized milk and the fact that it was absorbed immediately.

I do believe that there are lactose-intolerant people out there—I know there are—but not in the numbers that we see them. I bet we have 50 families that drink our milk who had thought that they were lactose intolerant, but just weren't. [Homogenized] milk just isn't the way it was meant to be consumed.



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live and produce milk over a period of eight years. With artificial hormones, you 'use up' that cow—in five years she's dead. Even though you might have gotten more milk from her sooner, what you're doing is squeezing it out of her. All in all, our cows live long, healthy lives, well into their teens."

Rick, who once practiced law but whose passion always stayed with the farm, has a sardonic crackle in his voice when he talks about the Food and Drug Administration's control of rBST labeling. "We labeled our products with a warning symbol that said we *didn't* use rBSTs, but the FDA told us to remove it," he says. In strong-arm fashion, an FDA representative showed up at the farm and told them face-to-face they had to remove the warning on the label or legal action would be taken against them. The reason? There was no evidence that hormones had negative effects on the milk, the user or the cow, according to the FDA. Ronnybrook opted to scrap the graphic and use just the words, but the FDA didn't allow that, either. Eventually, the government reversed the policy, though only partially: A

warning label is now allowed, but it must be accompanied with a disclaimer stating that artificial growth hormones have no adverse affects. (Still a controversial issue, rBSTs are prohibited in Europe. Studies cited in *What's in Your Milk?* by Dr. Daniel Epstein (Trafford Publishing, 2006; \$24.95 paperback) connect human developmental and reproductive problems, as well as some prostate and breast cancers, with the consumption of milk or meat from cows given growth hormones.)

The use of growth hormones aside, one of the biggest misconceptions people have about milk has to do with antibiotics, says Rick's daughter Kate, who is astute in the complexities of dairy farming. "People think that buying 'organic' means there's no antibiotics in milk," she says, "but there are no antibiotics in *any* milk consumers buy—the state and federal governments don't allow it. Milk is one of the most highly regulated foods there is."

The FDA's concern is that antibiotics overused in livestock could find their way into meat and milk, weakening the effects of drugs like penicillin and ampicillin

# As for homogenizing their milk—the Osofskys sit squarely in the “won’t do that” column.



taken for human illnesses. Because there is zero tolerance for antibiotics in milk, it's tested numerous times before final bottling, and each truckload is tested if several farms comingle their milk in one tanker. If antibiotics are found to have come from one farmer's milk, all 20,000 pounds on the truck are dumped and the farmer responsible pays the other farmers for their unsalable milk.

When a Ronnybrook cow gets sick, a veterinarian is called; if necessary, she is treated with antibiotics. “Many larger farms don't treat their cows—nor do they have them tended by veterinarians,” Rick says. “The cost of treatment and the loss of the milk could cost more than simply replacing them, so oftentimes cows are sent off to slaughter. But to us that's just unacceptable. Here, we pull a sick cow out of the milking stream for a period of time until no antibiotics show up. Her milk is taken out for about three to five days.” About the regulations governing antibiotics, he asserts, “Not allowing farmers to use antibiotics to treat sick animals was never the intention. The intention was to never use antibiotics *in the feed*.”

A promotional phrase used by Ronnybrook is that they are “Hopelessly out of date, and proud of it.” As for homogenizing their milk—a process that breaks down the butterfat globules so the milk is a uniform liquid—the Osofskys sit squarely in the “won't do that” column. Non-homogenized milk naturally separates and the cream rises to the top. “We wanted to go back to the raw milk that we always drank growing up on the farm,” Rick explains. Another forward-looking throwback is their use of returnable/reusable glass bottles.

Still, the Osofskys are not Luddites, and in many ways Ronnybrook has stepped into the twenty-first century. They have an accessible, online presence including web site, Facebook and a blog. Out in the pastures, advanced farming technology has condensed once laborious, month-long tasks into just days. One machine plants corn using a

computer connected to a satellite that shows exactly how much corn to plant in a given acre. “It's just bizarre,” Rick exclaims. “They [the service] set up and six hours later they're done. The machine probably costs as much as the farm—it costs us about \$500 an hour [to rent], but the planting takes only six to eight hours. It used to take six weeks.” Ronnybrook is also installing a new pasteurizer that will allow them to increase milk production from 300 gallons to 1,200 gallons an hour. “That's four times faster,” Ronnie says. “Hopefully it will shorten our day, which starts at 3am.”

Most dairy farmers would admit that the option for scaling back is tempting. “I think about just doing the Greenmarkets in New York City and not doing [local] distribution—then we wouldn't have to worry about the upkeep for all of our trucks,” Rick notes. “If we can find somebody to partner with and who wanted, as part of their brand, a local, all-natural dairy—to do things on a limited scale—that would be nice. If we could stay part of it, the kids could stay involved and at least the everyday pressures would be gone.” But finding young farmers who are interested in running a small dairy farm isn't easy. “A few guys do show up here and want to do dairy,” Rick notes. “They're not getting into it to make money. They are driven by the love of land and by the cows.”

Tours of Ronnybrook are ongoing and that's part of what the Osofskys say makes the farm “transparent.” “Any family member can give a tour of the farm,” Ronnie says. “We try to make the food chain legible.” ❧

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