

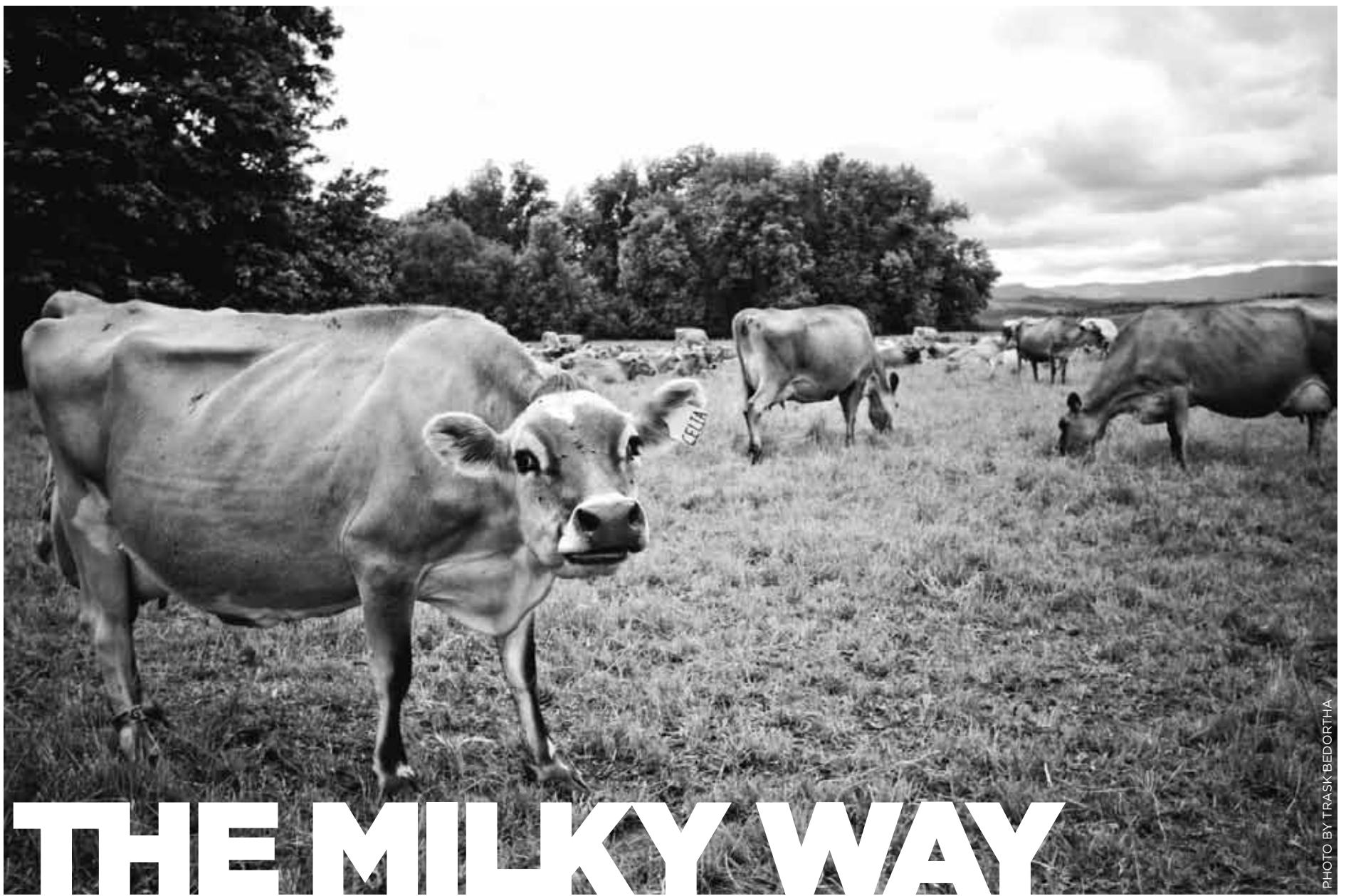


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THE MILKY WAY

Small organic dairies try for bovine bliss BY SHANNON FINNELL

If one thing is clear from omnivores committed to eating organic, it's that they care about the lives of the animals whose milk and meat they consume. Just look at the premise of the California Milk Advisory Board's multi-million dollar, decade-long "Happy Cows Come From California" ad campaign (which represents both conventional and organic). "I love it here!" exclaims one cow, surrounded by rolling green pastures.

The concerns of milk and cheese lovers worried that their dairy products are ethically curdled would likely be alleviated by a visit to Jon Bansen's family dairy farm, Double J Jerseys, south of Monmouth. Bansen learned dairy farming from his father in a small non-organic operation, but he turned more and more to organic practices in the '90s before joining the Organic Valley cooperative in 2000. Bansen has been turning the cows out to pasture more and more over the years, perfecting methods that resulted in his herd of about 180 Jersey cows spending about 20 hours a day outside in a system called "intensive rotational grazing."

Organic hasn't always translated to outdoor cows. Before last year, the National Organic Program's rule mandating access to pasture was vague. This left quite the loophole in organic policy, creating a wide berth between farms that favored a lot of pasture time and others that, while free from antibiotics and hormones, minimized their cows' time on grass.

In May 2010, Oregon's Confined Animal Feeding Operation program levied a \$20,000 fine against a Wilsonville area organic dairy that provides milk to the Pacific Village brand (sold locally at Kiva and Market of Choice) for manure-related violations. Neighbors told *The Oregonian*

that the cows were rarely given the opportunity to graze.

A month after the record-setting fine, the National Organic Program updated its regulations on how cows get their food. Before then, organic cows and other multi-stomached, cud-chewing animals were required to have some access to pasture during the grazing season, but the level of access was unspecified. The NOP realized that consumers who favored organic animal products weren't just concerned with limiting their intake of antibiotics and synthetic hormones; they also wanted to support a system of un-tortured, even happy cows that spent a large chunk of their lives

outdoors. The organic standards needed a more specific benchmark, but those standards also had to take into account the different climates where organic dairies exist.

Ultimately, the NOP settled on these requirements: Cows must graze in pasture for the entirety of the local growing season, which must not be fewer than 120 days. That time doesn't need to be consecutive; it can be broken up to deal with unforeseen weather events or other issues. During this time, the animals must obtain 30 percent of the dry matter in their food from pasture.

"It doesn't sound like a lot, but you have to keep in mind that they have to eat

more pounds in pasture than they would in hay," says Callyn Kircher of Oregon Tilth, an organic advocacy and certification organization. That's because the water content in pasture is higher than the feed the cows receive in the barn — it takes more eating to process the high-quality pasture diet.

So the access to pasture rule was updated in 2010 and, as of June 2011, all new and existing organic dairies are required to be in compliance. Smaller dairy farms that already kept their cows mostly outside didn't have to change much about their grazing practices. The law necessitated change mostly at farms with herds too large to forage on inadequately small or unmanaged pastures.

"I would say that the vast majority were already in compliance," Kircher says. "What's really changed is the record keeping."

To show that their cows meet the requirement of receiving 30 percent of their dry food from pasture, farmers must keep meticulous notes for annual inspection.

A heck of a good cow

It's clear that the precision and attention to detail of the record keeping required for organic certification is right up the Bansen's alley. The herd grazes in a roped-off sector of the fields for 12 hours before the cows are moved to a new area, after which the grazed field has 30 days until the cows return. The herd is managed specifically, Bansen says, to maximize the amount of