

# 'I think if you're an omnivore, you probably owe it to know where it came from.'

— JON BANSEN, ORGANIC DAIRY FARMER

grazing time and minimize the milking time, which takes place on pavement.

Even the herd's path from pasture to parlor is designed to get the cows back to the grass as soon as possible. In total, milking the Bansens' entire herd takes about two and a half hours, with about 15 minutes of pavement and milking time for each cow. The rest of the time, at least when weather doesn't prevent them from being outside, the herd is on grass.

For Bansen, farming is about treating each animal as a unique living being. "I choose to make sure all the animals we deal with have respect the whole way," Bansen says. Part of that respect is knowing each cow as an individual. Instead of numbers on their ear tags, each of Bansen's cows has a name tag. As they wander behind him in the pasture, he can turn and recognize them, just like 180 friends he happens to see every day. "I think that's Helen, isn't it?" She turns, and it is. "Helen's a heck of a good cow."

Since going organic, Bansen has noticed a significant improvement in the quality of his milk and in his herd's general health, though the quantity of milk yielded per cow has dropped a bit. "I'm not getting all the milk I used to," Bansen says of the switch from conventional to pasture-intensive organic. "I'm also not buying all the grain I used to and not taking care of sick cows."



JON BANSEN

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

Bansen's farm is part of Organic Valley, a farmer-owned cooperative that includes 1,643 farms across the U.S. The dairy industry calls Organic Valley's marketing strategy "aggressive," and that's probably accurate, although aggressive could also describe the conventional dairy industry itself. Organic Valley is a collection of true believers, farmers and workers united in their faith that smaller scale and organic is the only way to go.

## Raising healthy cows

Guy Jodarski, a veterinarian with Organic Valley, says the average life of a conventional dairy cow is only four years. Jodarski stands with Rosie, a Bansen cow who's now 14 years old and still milking, and credits her longer lifespan to an outdoor, high-forage life.

"This sort of lifestyle and diet is healthy for the cow, healthy for the land and healthy for the people," Jodarski says. It's not necessarily the fact that the cows are outside or organic that is significant to their health, he says. Making sure the pasture they're foraging is high quality also makes a huge difference.

In many conventional dairies, the lives of cows are cut short by sickness but also because the intensity of milk production shortens the window of time a cow can produce milk. After that, they're slaughtered.

At organic dairies, the access to pasture rule means that a more outdoor-oriented life is mandatory. Does that mean a life producing milk for humans can be happy? Jodarski thinks so. "It's a high quality life and it's more of a natural cow's life," Jodarski says. He says the annual pregnancy cycle that causes cows to lactate isn't something unnatural that farmers have created; it mimics what's found in the wild. "If you look at wild ruminants like

deer, sheep and bison, they have an annual cycle of pregnancy," he says.

Jodarski also says that harvesting an animal for milk can be a respectful process, citing India as a place where a major religion prohibits any disrespect of cows. "They don't eat them, but they drink the milk," he says.

Organic vets aren't left without medicine just because antibiotics used by conventional dairies are not in their arsenal. "There are herbal things we use," Jodarski says, such as

aloe vera for inflammation-related problems or garlic tincture for infections.

## Greener milk

Jodarski thinks that while growing concern for the welfare of animals and for more nutritious milk are part of the demand for organic dairy products, economics and the environment are also driving factors. "There are costs that no one is paying for in the other products," he says, "pollution and stuff like that."

The net effect of organic dairies on their environment isn't well established. Part of this is because organic farming practices can still vary quite a bit. One consistency is that organic dairies use feed that's also organically grown, and they can't use pesticides or genetically modified feed.

A big point of contention for people who are vegan, or who just eat less dairy for environmental reasons, is cows' methane production — those stinky farts also contain the potent greenhouse gas.

There's no getting around the product of their poop — organic cows still produce methane — but Jodarski says that the method of managing manure can determine what's lost to the environment. One Organic Center report says that the best organic farming practices have the capacity to reduce emissions to about half that of bad conventional practices.

In addition to dung, organic farms have an effect on greenhouse gas emissions because they truck in less grain. Jodarski says that the dairy industry as a whole is "moving out of an era with grain prices low," so the economic and environmental advantages of this aspect of organic milk will become more obvious as gas and grain prices rise.

## What's in a name?

Jodarski says one of the basic talking points of the conventional dairy industry is "milk is milk" — that there's no nutritional difference between conventional and organic milk. He says such campaigns try to show this by comparing the content between conventional and organic milk's protein and fat content, which don't tend to vary a lot, while ignoring data for omega three fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acid and beta carotene. "We're finding that there's quite a difference," he says.

"People say that organic farmers want to go backwards and nothing could be further from the truth," Jodarski says. He points out that organic farmers embrace good technology, using advances such as solar power on tractors and carefully tracking the health of their fields. "They don't accept every technology blindly. Chemicals and genetically modified organisms are not acceptable."

Bansen says that making the jump from conventional to organic brought the science of dairy farming together with what's best for cows and the planet. "It was an out of balance system. It seemed in balance to me, but I see the difference now," he says. "We slowed it down to the pace of nature." **EW**

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