

COMMODITY REPORT

Cooperative keeps positive outlook

By LOUISE HOFFMAN BROACH
louisebroach@yahoo.com

When actor Michael J. Fox put together a special program on optimism, he sought out Dr. Sam Simon, president and one of the founders of Hudson Valley Fresh, a non-profit dairy cooperative.

After all, what other cooperative — at a time when milk prices are recovering from historic lows — is paying member farmers \$20/hundredweight (cwt.) and at the same time, avows a dedication to promoting the Hudson Valley as one of the premier food regions in the country? What better example of an enduring sense of hope in agriculture?

A producer of “Michael J. Fox: Adventures of an Incurable Optimist” had tasted Hudson Valley Fresh milk and told him about it. Fox’s brother-in-law is Michael Pollan, author of “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” and the “Botany of Desire,” so Fox was already well-versed in sustainable agriculture.

“He understood our plight and he said, ‘I want to talk with this guy,’” Simon said. On April 23, Fox and a film crew toured Simon’s Plankenhorn Farm in Pleasant Valley, as well as Boice Brothers in Kingston, where Hudson Valley Fresh’s milk is processed. The special aired on ABC May 7.

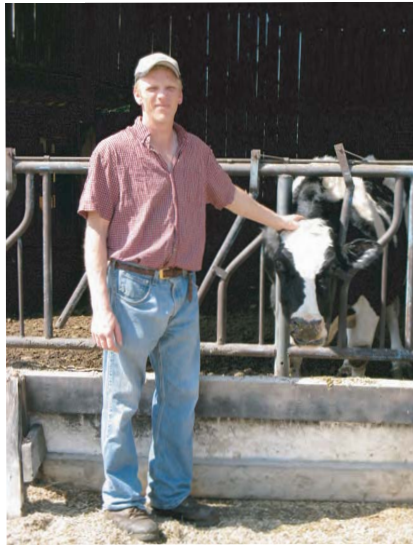
Normally, dairy farmers don’t have control over milk prices, but Hudson Valley Fresh, a non-profit committed to sustainable agriculture, provides enough to pay what Simon said is a living wage. The high price is a result of complete control over the milk that is processed separately at Boice Brothers. The cooperative also aggressively markets the milk, based on its quality.

“We compete on quality and quality only,” Simon said about Hudson Valley Fresh’s whole, skim, low-fat and chocolate milk, half and half, heavy cream and sour cream. “We’re willing to say, ‘this is worth more.’ People are buying more than just milk.”

The milk is in stores within 36 hours after leaving the farm and is not ultra-pasteurized. Hudson Valley Fresh cows get a special diet designed to fit their nutritional needs and the farmers commit to not using rBST. The farmers integrate environmental concerns and cow comfort by using mats made from recycled tires for the cows to lay down on. The emphasis on these farms is put on cleanliness.

Eight farms in Columbia and Dutchess counties are member producers. All of them have extremely low somatic cell counts in their milk, something that Hudson Valley Fresh insists upon to maintain the integrity of milk quality, Simon said. The counts, which monitor the health of the herd and individual cows, average 150,000 cells per milliliter at the cooperative’s dairies. The federal government’s standard is 750,000.

While all of the dairies are exemplary in their care and practices, Jim Davenport’s Tollgate Farm in Ancramdale is the cream of the crop. For the third time since 2005, Davenport and his family were platinum National Quality Dairy Award winners last year. More than 2,800 farms were nominated: the Davenports were among the top seven. Davenport was also Agri-mark’s Top Quality Producer for 2008, with the best milk quality record among all 1,300 members of that cooperative. His average somatic cell count as a result of meticulous cleanliness during milking, a tie-style barn,



John Conklin with one of his cows at his farm in Copake, NY.



The Kiernan Family at their farm in Ancramdale, NY.

DAIRY: Hudson Valley cooperative has grown to sell 40,000 pounds of milk per week

▼ Continued from PG. 15

foam-type mattresses, kiln-dried sawdust and chips is slightly more than 54,000 for his 60 cows. In July, after an upgrade to his exercise yard, the count dropped to 41,000 and is at about 40,000 now, he said.

"Clean udders make clean milk," Davenport said. "Hudson Valley Fresh enhances our milk price for fluid milk. Our quality standards are way higher."

The cooperative started in 2004, when Simon, who grew up on a dairy farm in Middletown, retired from orthopedic surgery and decided to go back into the dairy business. It broke his heart, he said, to learn that milk prices were as low as they had been in the early 1980s, about \$13/cwt. for Class I. Input prices were so high that dairies all around him were failing. There were 275 dairies in Dutchess County in the 1970s and now there are just 26. Hudson Valley Fresh farms are currently preserving 5,000 acres of open land, significantly contributing to agriculture sustainability.

At first, the co-op sold 400 pounds of milk a week in six stores in the Hudson Valley. Now, it sells 40,000 pounds a week in markets that have extended to New York City and Long Island.

"It's growing every month," Simon said about the demand for the milk, which he wants to "brand, like the Napa Valley does for wine."

Hudson Valley Fresh is served at the New York governor's executive mansion, a practice started by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer and continued by David Paterson. New York University, Bard College, Vassar College, Millbrook School, The Dutchess Day School, and the Culinary Institute of America also serve the cooperative's milk.

Two years ago, Hudson Valley Fresh started selling in Whole Food stores in New York City, which Simon said came about because the chain's vice president drove past his farm and saw a Hudson Valley Fresh truck and recalled tasting the milk.

"They came to us," he said, noting that the milk's reputation has grown so much that there are food stores and restaurants, including the upscale Eli's Manhattan, whose owner, Eil Zabar, will not serve milk from any other dairy.

Having the support of the retail owners, Simon said, is key. It is part of Hudson Valley Fresh's whole marketing philosophy; once consumers are convinced to try the milk, they will find it tastes so good that they'll become loyal customers and be willing to pay a little more for it than for conventional milk. That's why member farms regularly participate in tastings in New York City and other places in the region where the milk is marketed.

"You have to get the farmer out to meet



The Kiernan Family farm in Ancramdale, NY.

the public," he said. "You have to meet the consumer, face-to-face."

Simon's philosophy, and his willingness to commit his own money to get the cooperative going, has been greatly responsible for the success of Hudson Valley Fresh in a time when many dairy farmers are struggling to stay in business. He also lobbied the industrial development agency in Dutchess

County to give the cooperative grant funds for marketing initiatives to build trust and confidence in the milk.

Davenport agrees that the promotional component is important. "The consumer has to be convinced to try it, because if they do, they'll come back for more," he said.