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The Dairies Are Half-Pint, but the Flavor Isn't

By [MARIAN BURROS](#)

ANNE SAXELBY had what she calls an “aha moment” a couple of years ago when she drove upstate to try the cultured butter made by Evans Farmhouse Creamery in Chenango County. Ms. Saxelby, who owns Saxelby Cheesemongers in Manhattan, said that for all the butter she had eaten in her life, “I had really never had butter before — this is butter.”

More and more people across the country are being treated to the same aha experience as they find a burgeoning variety of fresh dairy products made in small batches on little farms and in small creameries. And it's worth the extra money.

These artisanal operations are turning cow, goat or sheep milk into simple, straightforward foods like crème fraîche, butter, buttermilk, ice cream, puddings, custards, yogurt, yogurt-based sauces and yogurt drinks. Many of these dairies also sell unhomogenized, and in a few cases even unpasteurized, milk with an old-fashioned farmhouse flavor.

The movement is, in some ways, an offshoot of the American cheesemaking revival that began 15 to 20 years ago, and some of the creameries make fresh cheeses like mascarpone, mozzarella and ricotta that let the quality of the milk speak for itself.

Chalk it up to a lucky confluence of events. Most small dairy farmers cannot keep afloat selling milk to large processors at commodity prices, so those who are trying to survive are looking for alternatives. At the same time there is an increasingly sophisticated public that appreciates the difference between mass-produced dumbed-down food and the handiwork of a small dairy that has learned to produce exceptional butter or yogurt or ice cream by doing it the way it was done before World War II, when there was a creamery in every town.

Nancy Nipples started the Pike Place Market Creamery in Seattle 30 years ago, selling milk, butter, cream and the like to help local independent dairies. It didn't help enough, and little by little they disappeared. “Last year a whole new group of local independent dairies started up a new cycle,” Ms. Nipples said. “Hallelujah! The cream has 40 to 45 percent butter fat so you don't have to chant over it to whip it.” (Nancy Nipples is the name she uses to sign checks; her full name, taken after a divorce, is Nancy Nipples the Milkmaid.)

The comeback is taking place across the country. Earlier this month, Milk Thistle Farm, a young biodynamic dairy in Ghent, N.Y., began selling organic milk at some New York City greenmarkets.

The demand for artisanal dairy has already turned butter into an \$8 appetizer at Momofuku Ssam Bar in New York City, where the chef, [David Chang](#), accompanies half a baguette with St. Helen's Farm goat's milk butter from England and Vermont Butter and Cheese cow butter.

At Osteria Mozza and Pizzeria Mozza in Los Angeles, Nancy Silverton makes fresh mozzarella every other day,

buying the curds from two dairies just outside the city. Four other mozzarellas are brought in from Italy.

[Thomas Keller](#) cannot rave enough about the extraordinary “quality, flavor and freshness” of Animal Farm butter, which Diane St. Clair makes in Orwell, Vt. “When I started buying her butter, I saw seasonal changes that don’t exist in commercial butters,” he said. “Her butter is almost an orange in the spring. It has a different flavor profile and nuances throughout the year.”

Mr. Keller, owner and chef of Per Se and the French Laundry, buys as much Animal Farm butter as he can get his hands on, which is nearly all of it. For six weeks in July and August, the butter isn’t available. “The cows are doing their thing and I’m fine with that,” he said. “I just love the idea of supporting that kind of tradition.”

Though few shoppers can buy Ms. St. Clair’s butter, they are beginning to find artisan dairy products like the crème fraîche made by Kendall Farms in Atascadero, Calif., that Mr. Keller also raves about.

On the East Coast, stores are carrying the organic yogurt and heavy cream from the 45 Jersey cows at Butterworks Farm in Westfield, Vt.

Begun 30 years ago, it has grown into a million-dollar business, said Jack Lazor, who owns the farm with his wife, Anne. “We’re having a ball.”

“I wanted to be back on the land when I was at [Tufts](#) in the 70s,” Mr. Lazor said as we stood near his broken wind turbine that would ordinarily have been supplying a third to a half of his farm’s electricity.

“We were working on the kitchen stove and making everything and going door to door,” he said, finally graduating to farmers’ markets before selling in stores.

But changing over to old-style dairy can be surprisingly difficult. Unlike Mr. Lazor, Patrick Lango, a fourth-generation dairy farmer whose family owns White Cow Dairy in East Otto, N.Y., near Buffalo, is still struggling. There have been many unexpected barriers to meeting this new demand.

Finding the expert who knows how to do things the old-fashioned way took him to Italy. That’s where he also found the small-scale equipment he needed. Then he had to persuade the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets to adjust its rules so they would apply to a tiny dairy.

“You can either whine and complain a lot or you can ask yourself what can you do with milk that’s really easy and can get the most amount of money,” he said.

He decided that turning the family farm into an 1870s village creamery made sense because “it’s food people would want but can’t get. It’s all about food memory.”

He does not think the public realized, even 10 to 15 years ago, what it was missing in the kind of dairy products being sold in stores.

“We’ve pushed the technology approach too far in some cases,” said Dr. Paul Kindstedt, professor of nutrition and food sciences at the [University of Vermont](#) and an expert in dairy, “and what’s going on is a movement to alternative foods of all types,” or what some call real foods.

Mr. Lango never stops experimenting, and some of his most delicious results are his low-fat yogurts: the maple, the vanilla bean with honey and the orange, which tastes like a smoothie. The maple and vanilla-bean custard and the cranberry custard have a lovely texture and flavor and the yogurt-based habanero sauce would be wonderful on pork or chicken or fish.

In New York City, Murray's Cheese carries some White Cow products; otherwise you have to live in or around Buffalo to enjoy them.

At the moment, Mr. Lango doesn't make a dime. "I've never drawn a salary in 20 years," but this year, he said, things will be better.

Without his passion, Mr. Lango might have given up long ago.

"I get very upset watching these farms drop away," he said. "It's criminal what's going on out there. I really want to take on the world in a guerrilla-like way. Our dairy can be a blueprint for little dairies."

States like Wisconsin, Vermont and New York are helping other small farmers get these businesses going. In 2004, Senator Herb Kohl, Democrat of Wisconsin, pushed through one of those infamous earmarks for \$2.4 million for just such a project.

Not all new dairy farmers get lucky the first time. Paul Stephan of Leesburg, Va., eager to escape the hospitality business, bought a farm in 1999. He stocked it with a water buffalo bull and four water buffalo heifers, ready to give birth. Mozzarella from their milk was the gleam in his eye.

It was all downhill after that.

"I was very naïve," he said. "I thought I could tame anything with the right handling. To make a long story short, the four were not milkable."

So he turned to his single Jersey cow and started making fresh cow milk mozzarella.

The mozzarella took off; the buffalo and farm were sold. Now Mr. Stephan buys cow's milk from a local farmer. His Blue Ridge Dairy Company mozzarella has been joined by a crème fraîche with a delightful tang and by yogurt, the nonfat version so thick and delicious you would swear it was made with whole milk.

But it's the mozzarella that has reached stardom. Jersey milk, with its high butterfat content, is part of the reason. Still, it was not creamy enough to suit Mr. Stephan, so recently he began to add more cream, making it the richest, creamiest, milkiest American-made mozzarella I've ever had.

As successful as Mr. Stephan has been, he can't get those water buffalo out of his mind. He just bought 15 heifers from the Woodstock Water Buffalo Company that until recently made mozzarella in Vermont. In the meantime, watch for local buffalo milk mozzarella in Washington within three years.

Robert Kaufelt, owner of Murray's Cheese and a big booster of farmstead dairy products, carries unhomogenized organic milk, cream and buttermilk from Evans Farmhouse. Because the fat globules remain intact, the milk tastes closer to the way it does when it has just come out of the cow.

The buttermilk is so good, now I will drink it willingly, along with a very delicate organic goat milk from Kortright Creek Creamery of Stone and Thistle Farm in Delaware County, N.Y.

Just a week ago I had my first taste of Hudson Valley Fresh Milk. This cooperative of 10 farmers, begun in 2005, has found a better, meaning more lucrative, way of staying in the milk business. These farmers are guaranteed a minimum of \$20 for 100 pounds of milk, and while the going price at the moment is \$22 because of the high price of corn, it's often in the low teens.

Ronnybrook Farm Dairy, one of the better-known small dairies and creameries in this area, buys some of the co-op's milk. Because the milk is pasteurized for a very short time and arrives in New York City stores like the Vinegar Factory and [Whole Foods](#) within 36 hours of leaving the cow, the milk tastes particularly sweet.

“The demand, I think, is huge,” Mr. Kaufelt said. “People always want better flavor.”

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