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Got Raw Milk? Not Unless You Own Your Own Cow

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Farmers Offer Bovine Stakes
To Bypass Health Rule;
Wisconsin Sours on Plan

By KATY McLAUGHLIN

Robert Corya, a retiree in Indianapolis, craves a substance that Indiana law forbids him to buy: unpasteurized milk. He and his wife drink eight gallons of it a month, and he believes it makes him healthier. "Tastes like melted French vanilla ice cream," he says.

Mr. Corya can slake his thirst thanks to a dairy cow named Charlotte and a loophole that is setting off battles over milk across the U.S. Laws in Indiana and other states allow cow owners to drink raw milk from their own cows. So Mr. Corya bought a share in Charlotte.



Charlotte

Today, there are more than a dozen cow-share programs in the U.S. Farmers Mark and Deborah Apple of McCordsville, Ind., who launched a program for Charlotte and their other cows early last year, say demand is so great that people sometimes burst into tears when told they

have to go on a waiting list.

Ever since Louis Pasteur first invented it back in the 1860s, pasteurization—flash-heating liquids to kill bacteria—has been one of the world's great food-safety discoveries. Today, as a precaution against common milk-borne pathogens including salmonella and E.coli, it is required for all milk sold to U.S. consumers in interstate commerce.

But a growing group of raw-milk lovers, from people who grew up on farms to devotees of organic food and health gurus, say unpasteurized milk is not just delicious and nutritious, but it is also good for everything from arthritis to lactose intolerance.

Aajonus Vonderplanitz, a popular author in the raw-milk underground, says he has cured himself of cancer and diabetes with an all-raw-food diet. Today, much of the appetite for raw milk is being whetted by the Weston A. Price Foundation, a Washington-based group that promotes traditional foods such as grass-fed beef and unpasteurized milk. The foundation, established in 1999, has quickly grown to 150 U.S. chapters with 3,500 members.

State laws about raw milk differ. In California, it is legal for licensed dairies to sell it in stores. In Wisconsin, and in 21 other states, it is illegal to sell raw milk, even from right off the farm.

In 1999, Wisconsin dairy farmers Gleta Martin and Tim Wightman started hearing from customers that they were



Tim Wightman

looking for a source of unpasteurized milk. They started a cow-share program, which had been tried by others elsewhere on a smaller scale. Consumers bought a \$10 share in a particular cow, such as Louella or Anabell or Twila. As owners, they were entitled to the milk. Then, each time they picked up a gallon, they paid the farm, Clearview Acres, a \$2.50 "boarding fee," ostensibly to compensate for care and housing of their cow.

Wisconsin regulator Thomas Leitzke says the division of agriculture initially approved the cow share, thinking it would benefit just a few people. But word quickly spread and within a year and half, 265 families had joined. The tiny, debt-burdened farm's income increased by a third. "It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened" in her 27-year career on the farm, says Ms. Martin.

Farms across the country quickly took notice. U.S. dairy farmers have been getting as little as 94 cents a gallon this

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year, the lowest prices since 1978. But people eager for unpasteurized milk have been willing to pay as much as \$12 a gallon. Cow shares popped up in Virginia, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Utah, Florida and Washington.

Wisconsin officials say they grew alarmed by how large and commercial the Clearview Acres' cow share had become. The farm was advertising it in the local paper. The division of agriculture sent out an employee posing as a shareholder to take samples of raw milk for analysis in the state laboratory. Though the milk was found to be wholesome, the division sent Clearview Acres a letter in April 2001 informing the farm that it was cancelling the cow-share program.

"We made a mistake. We never should have let them do it in the first place," says Mr. Leitzke.

But Mr. Wightman and Ms. Martin refused to quit, arguing that the cow share had been established with the state's blessing. The bickering continued until December 2001, when the farm was implicated in an outbreak of campylobacter, a pathogen that gave 75 people in the area bloody diarrhea, fever and nau-

sea. This time Wisconsin officials shut down the cow share and declared all such programs illegal.

Health officials said that 70 of the 75 people who got sick had drunk milk from the farm. Mr. Wightman denies that his milk caused the outbreak, saying his tests showed the milk was clean. He believes people got sick from eating hamburgers or Thanksgiving turkey.

Cow shares in other states have also run into trouble with regulators. Last fall, the Apples in Indiana received a cease and desist order from the Indiana State Board of Animal Health, accusing them of operating a dairy without a license. Farmers in Colorado, Tennessee and Texas say their raw-milk operations have also been heavily scrutinized.

Raw-milk defenders fought back. Clearview Acres spent a year and \$27,000 in legal fees wrangling with Wisconsin officials. The Apples logged hours at the law library. And the Weston A. Price Foundation set up a fund to support cow-share programs.

Some shareholders rebelled in their own way. Billy Belt, an Indianapolis schoolteacher and father of three, was incensed. At night, when he was sure no

state regulators were watching, he sneaked into the Apple's milk shed and smuggled out milk, leaving a few dollars on the table.

Today, armed with new legal structures they hope will shelter them from pasteurization laws, both farms have restarted their programs. Clearview Acres has stopped dealing with the department of agriculture and registered with the Wisconsin division of securities instead. Today, people buy a share of the farm's dairy license and enjoy a "shareholder privilege" that allows them to buy raw milk. Fifty families have signed on to date, Clearview Acres says.

To strengthen the argument that their customers are true cow owners, the Apples have asked them to get more involved in animal husbandry. So now the shareholders, mostly suburbanites and city folk, hold semiannual meetings where they decide things like what to feed the cows and how many times a day to milk.

Health regulators in both Wisconsin and Indiana say they still frown on using loopholes to sell raw milk. They haven't yet taken a good look at the new programs and can't say whether the farms are breaking any laws.