

Alternative Cows Find Their Dairy Niche

—John O'Meara

Grass-loving dairy cow breeds offer resilience in dynamic milk economy

With the arrival of spring, organic dairy farms across America are anything but tranquil. While farmers prepare for the work that comes with better weather, they are also grappling with dynamic forces that could change the entire dairy industry forever.

Skyrocketing grain prices, combined with ever-increasing global demand for dairy products, mean that your average organic dairy farmer sits at an all-important crossroads. Can organic dairy farmers meet the demand for their product while producing milk in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner?

Although Holsteins and Jerseys have been the breeds of choice in American dairy barns for decades, some farmers are thriving by working with other breeds. By making less milk at lower cost, hardier breeds could be poised to occupy a larger role in America's dairies, particularly on organic farms.

Milking Shorthorns

People have kept Milking Shorthorn cattle in Richard Beal's neck of the woods for centuries. Beal milks about 30 Shorthorns, a breed renowned for its resiliency and ability to thrive on a forage-based diet. Grazing his herd of cows on about 80 acres of land, Beal estimates that he feeds a newly



Milking Shorthorns

freshened cow about 10 to 15 pounds of grain per day—a modest amount by modern dairy standards. With organic grains currently fetching \$400 per ton or more, a cow like the ones in Richard Beal's herd could end up being

the cow of the future.

At one time, Beal's herd consisted almost entirely of high-producing Holsteins, with a few Milking Shorthorns used in his children's 4-H projects. "The Holsteins made a lot of milk, but I didn't keep much money," says Beal. Eventually, he converted his herd to improve his herd's economics.

Organic since 1997, Beal's farm straddles the road in an archetypical New England landscape: rolling hills interspersed with brooks and dense woods. It's no accident that Beal transitioned to organic with the first wave of dairy farmers switching over in the area at around the same time he switched to milking mostly Shorthorns.

"I think it's a great cow for an organic producer," says Beal, emphasizing that different strategies might work for different farmers. Although he sings the praises of his prized Shorthorns, he does still have a few Holsteins and Holstein-crosses left over from his old herd. "I'm probably feeding the dry Holsteins as much or more grain as the Shorthorns that just calved."

With average milk production hovering around 50 pounds daily, Beal aims for keeping long-lived cows with very few health problems. In fact, that is one way Beal's Milking Shorthorn's achieve economic sustainability—by saving money with vet bills.

"The Shorthorns just seem to take care of themselves," Beal says. "I haven't had a vet in about 12 years." The herd has virtually no foot problems, which can devastate dairy cows. He hasn't had to trim hooves in three years.

Although Beal says that the main management difference in keeping Shorthorns versus Holsteins is just feeding less grain, they may also require a more long-term perspective. They often live longer than the average high-producing Holstein, but they take a little longer to hit their peak production.

"A lot of the time, it takes until the third lactation to really get them rolling," says Beal. Heifers at Beal's farm also aren't rushed into their first pregnancy. Many times, heifers don't calve until they are 2-and-a-half years old, a few months later than the age at which many dairy farmers expect.

Whereas Milking Shorthorns might require a look to the long view of farming, they also offer some unusual marketing potential. Beal says he has a ready market for bull calves in the form of New England teamsters. The striking Milking Shorthorn colors—red, red and white, and roan—along with strength and an even disposition are in demand among people training oxen across the region. Matched bull calves don't stay on his farm for long, says Beal.

Even a modest amount of grain can quickly add up to a large bill on any of today's dairy farms. Mary-Howell and Klaas Martens operate Lakeview Organics in Penn Yan, New York, which supplies organic grain for farmers in the northeast. Mary-Howell says the cost of organic grain has gone up dramatically in the past year. "It has essentially doubled," says Martens, adding that grain prices are unlikely to go down in the foreseeable future.

Martens accounts the dramatic rise in grain prices to increased demand, estimating that the number of organic animals has recently increased by 50 percent while organic grain acreage has only increased by 8 percent. In addition, demand for ethanol has subtly affected the price of organic grain, since many farmers who might have switched to organic grain production are staying conventional because of the current lucrative market for grains to make ethanol.

Martens does not see increased interest in lower-input cows. Instead she sees more farmers looking to produce alternative forages or to grow their own small grains. At the same time, she says, grain sales "are doing just fine."

Normandes

Mark Fellows of Chase Hill Farm in tiny Warwick, Massachusetts, has been rotationally grazing for 25 years. After taking over his father's dairy farm, Fellows found that the Jerseys and Holsteins he was working with didn't fit his goals. He was striving for an organic, grass-fed herd. "The Jerseys and Holsteins didn't really hold up well," he says. "They got a little thin." Fellows started breeding his cows to Normande bulls to get his farm functioning the way he wanted.

A black and white cow originating in France, Normandes have been bred for centuries for their ability to graze and for producing milk that makes outstanding cheese. Because Chase Hill Farm makes cheese for a local market, Fellows felt this was the breed for him. In addition, he placed importance on the fact that if a farmer is breeding artificially, there are many Normande bulls to choose from, since they are a popular cow in many parts of the world.

Currently certified organic and a 100-percent grass-fed herd, Fellows milks seasonally. He breeds his cows to calve March through April. All the dairy cows milking together at the same time of the year means that Fellows makes his cheese when the cows are grazing. "It doesn't get any better than that," says Fellows, stressing that grass is the premium feed for dairy cattle. Seasonal milking also means that the farmer gets a respite from milking. In Fellows' case he says, "I get three to four months off every winter."

Fellows' cows give an average of 7,000-8,000 pounds of milk per lactation with absolutely no grain. He grazes for seven months of the year, makes hay for the winter, and saves high quality second-cutting hay for the spring, when the cycle comes around again and his cows start making milk. "We can't keep up with our market for grass-fed milk," says Fellows. In fact he feels that dual-purpose cows like Normandes will have to play a larger role in the dairy industry. Citing

upswings in the price of grain and fuel, Fellows says, "The dairy industry is going to have to change."

Mark Fellows sees an opportunity in the dairy world. He says that he knows of several people that are milking relatively few cows—five or six or ten dual-purpose cows like Normandes or Shorthorns—and they are doing quite well selling milk directly to an eager market. Mark Fellows' experience with grass and cows tells him that more cows like his Normandes will be grazing and making milk in years to come.



Richard Beal and Kate Dabny at Beal's farm with Milking Shorthorn heifers.

Jerome Chateau, the president and founder of Normande Genetics, a company that sells Normande semen in the United States, says that more farmers have been looking into Normandes lately. “There’s been a greater interest over the past few months,” says Chateau, noting that the higher cost of grain is only one of the factors driving this trend.

Methods like those in practice at Mark Fellows’ farm may spell out more than just economic sustainability for dairy farmers—they may help significantly decrease the amount of greenhouse gases produced in the dairy industry. Cows walking from paddock to paddock, grazing for their feed, are less dependent on inputs such as grain—which is often trucked in from distant locations. Alternative breeds of cows may fit in well in a low-input farming model and may also make an important contribution to the health of the planet.

Dexters

Given that higher grain prices could very well be a fixed part of America’s agricultural future, it’s not just Milking Shorthorns and Normandes that are getting a second look across the dairy industry. A wide range of hardier alternatives to Jerseys and Holsteins exist. Some farmers work well with Ayrshires, a breed that rivals the milk production of a Holstein but often requires less grain. At the other end of the spectrum stands the tiny Dexter. According to the breed standard, Dexter cows range in size from 36 to 42 inches tall. They originated in southwestern Ireland, where they lived in a semi-feral state for centuries.

There’s not much history of Dexters being milked commercially in North America. In Great Britain, however, Beryl Rutherford ran a Dexter dairy for decades. At one time, Rutherford milked 60 Dexters and shipped the milk commercially. Now in her 80s and retired, Rutherford says that Dexters can stand up against modern dairy breeds. “For their size they compare very well, and because of the consistency throughout the lactation it can surprise you. It also means a fair proportion of yield can be taken on maintenance rations. My best cow would do 800 gallons, but only gave a peak of three and a half gallons daily. When I was desperately trying to dry her off, she would still be doing one and one half gallons.”

Suited to a low-input farming model, a Dexter dairy herd could be a way for new farmers to get started with less debt and

less dependence on fluctuating grain prices. Unlike modern dairy breeds, Dexters have not been bred for one particular trait. Beryl Rutherford’s cows making a good chunk of their milk on maintenance rations in Great Britain may illuminate an opportunity for American dairy farmers caught in the crunch of high grain prices—producing less product while trimming costs to a minimum.



The Dexter breed originated in the British Isles. This one lives on the John O’Mear farm in Maine.

In 2005, Beryl Rutherford completed a book on her life as a farmer: *My Love Affair with the Dexter* (Triple D Books). Filled with tales of adversity and success that could originate from someone working with any breed of cattle, Rutherford also highlights some strengths of the Dexter breed. Rutherford writes that over the years many of her cows calved and milked well into their teens. Rutherford’s Dexters lived for many years with minimum shelter in England’s sometimes inhospitable climate. “Because of their long history in Ireland of neglect, they are hardy and tough and live where other breeds would not,” writes Rutherford.

The milk records from Rutherford’s herd from 1971 and 1972 show the potential for the breed but also raise the question of where cows producing this amount of milk fit in the modern marketplace. Many of Rutherford’s cows gave 4,000 to 6,000 pounds of milk in a lactation, or around 500 to 700 gallons of milk.

Although this amount of milk might not make much of a dent paying the bills on many dairy farms, farms that process their own milk into a value-added product may be able to make use of the strengths of a breed like the Dexter while maximizing the value of modest milk yields.

Rosemarie Belforti runs Finger Lake Dexter Creamery in New York, milking four Dexters. Belforti’s Dexters stand around 36 inches—somewhere around the lower height limit of the breed standard. Belforti may milk small cows on a relatively small scale, but she says that her product, kefir cheese made fresh on the farm, is in big demand. “Sales have been good and consistent,” says Belforti.

Like many farmers working with an unusual breed, Belforti says that there is a large demand for the breed itself. “There is great interest in Dexters right now. I have people calling every week to come and look at them. I have a waiting list of folk who want to buy Dexters. The interest I think is getting bigger and bigger.”

Randall Linebacks

Jim Stampone, of Winter Hill Farm in Freeport, Maine, milks seven cows that are even more rare than Belforti’s Dexters. Randall Linebacks originated on the farm of Everett Randall in Sunderland, Vermont. Descended from cattle common in New England in the 18th and 19th centuries, Randalls are triple purpose—they historically produced meat and milk and were used as draft animals. Kept as a closed herd