

Why milk has gone sour: Tasteless, stripped of nutrients and churned out by 'battery cows' who never see a blade of grass



'The nutritional quality of most supermarket milk wouldn't hold a candle to the pinta delivered to our doorstep all those years ago'

On the Reading estate where I grew up in the early 1950s, our milk was from a local dairy.

Our two pints of silver top would arrive daily on the doorstep, each with a thick band of yellow cream stretching one-third of the way down the bottle - a sure sign that the cows had been grazing up to their hocks in clover-rich grassland.

In those days, full-fat milk was considered a 'protective food', one that would keep you fit and free of disease.

All I know is that my brother and I invariably squabbled over who was to get 'the top of the milk' on our breakfast porridge.

The dairy had been set up by a local farmer in the 1920s.

Then, as now, milk producers were being crippled by rising costs and the meagre prices paid by powerful dairy companies.

Entrepreneurial farmers responded by setting up retail rounds in nearby towns and villages in a bid to make a better living for their families.

Though the pre-war economy was deep in recession, it was a period of expansion in the British dairy industry.

By the time my brother and I were racing each other to the morning pintas, our Berkshire dairy was supplying half the town.

Everywhere in Britain — outside the biggest cities — milk was mostly local and from cows spending most of the year grazing fresh green grass.

Since then, dairy farming has changed beyond recognition. During my 40 years as a farming journalist, nine out of ten dairy farms have gone out of business.

I've known dozens of farming families who've been forced to put their beloved herds under the auctioneer's hammer — families who loved their animals, cared for the countryside and took pride in the fine food they produced.

Today's milk business is dominated by a handful of large supermarkets and processing dairies, all slugging it out for a share of the action.

The farmers who survive the inevitable war of attrition are forced to squeeze more and more milk from their over-worked cows.

Even then they struggle to earn a living from the job, as yesterday's gathering in Westminster of militant dairy farmers — who forced farming minister Jim Paice to admit he did not know the cost of a pinta, and are now threatening to disrupt the Olympics — testifies.

No doubt classical economists view all this as a triumph of efficient food production.

Milk is plentiful and cheap, with supermarkets frequently using it as a loss-leader in their battle for market share. Low-fat milk was on offer at just 32p a pint in Tesco this week.



Farmers are under more pressure than ever to squeeze more and more from their cows. Picture posed by female farmer.

Whether we consumers truly benefit from the dairy revolution is open to question. The nutritional quality of most supermarket milk wouldn't hold a candle to the pinta delivered to our doorstep all those years ago.

Many dairy farmers, in their bid to drive down costs, now keep their cows off pasture, feeding them

instead on high-energy cereals and maize, and on high-protein crops like soya.

Herds are getting bigger, and some farmers are choosing to keep them inside for much of the year or even all of it. US-style mega-dairies — in effect, battery-farmed cows — are now threatened for the British countryside.

'Farmers' relentless drive for cost savings has put increasing pressure on the long-suffering dairy cow.'

Professor Ton Baars, a global expert on the health qualities of dairy foods, says milk produced this way contains lower levels of key disease-fighting nutrients, such as omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins and the anti-cancer substance CLA.

From a health point of view, the best milk comes from cows grazing fresh pasture in which there are plenty of clover plants and deep-rooting herbs such as plantain, dandelion and chicory.

In fact, the very milk enjoyed by earlier generations before the arrival of supermarkets and the EU common agricultural policy.

Even the supposed benefits of low-fat milk are now being challenged.

A number of scientists claim it's sugar and refined carbohydrates that are to blame for modern diseases like diabetes and heart disease, not saturated fat — especially when the fat is from natural sources such as cattle grazing clover-rich pasture.

They point out that even whole milk contains only four per cent fat, hardly making it a fatty food.

And apart from calcium, many of the most valuable nutrients such as omega-3s, CLA and vitamin D are in the fat fraction most of us throw away.

It's not just consumers who are worse off.

Farmers' relentless drive for cost savings has put increasing pressure on the long-suffering dairy cow.



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She's now forced to produce twice the volume of milk provided by her 1960s forbears, and it's taking a heavy toll on her health, fertility and lifespan.

No wonder actress Joanna Lumley has taken up the cudgels on behalf of dairy cows.

She's heading an animal rights' campaign aimed at giving them the sort of protection in European law

that's provided for battery hens.

One of the key guarantees she's seeking is the animals' freedom to graze fresh pasture, at least in summer.

With Britain's hard-pressed dairy farmers on the streets demanding a better deal, there's a clear need for a new vision for dairy farming.

Fortunately we have a perfect model from history — the epic story of a forgotten food hero of 90 years ago.

In the early 1920s, farm prices crashed following the mini-boom in agriculture that accompanied the First World War.

Dairy farms were particularly hard hit, with many going to the wall.

But an innovative farmer-inventor called Arthur Hosier came up with a revolutionary idea.

He would keep his cows out in the fields permanently, so saving the heavy labour costs and disease risks associated with putting them in sheds for part of the year.

To make the system work, he designed a mobile milking platform through which cows could be milked in the field.

It was equipped with generator, refrigeration plant and vacuum pipeline to take the milk direct from cow to churn without coming into contact with the air.



'There's a clear need for a new vision for dairy farming'

Hosier's friends thought he'd gone off his head when he bought a big stretch of Wiltshire downland and covered it with cows at a time when many dairy farmers were going bust.

But the intrepid pioneer went on to make his fortune by selling quality milk direct to the public. Because his costs were low — and there was no middleman — it remained affordable to most people, even in hard times.

Out in the open air, his cows stayed remarkably free of disease, including TB which was rife among dairy herds of the time.

His milk was certified so pure by the county medical authority that a lot was sent direct to London hospitals for patients too sick to tolerate everyday milk.

So successful was the system that by the early 1930s several hundred farmers had adopted 'open-air dairying'.

But with the coming of the Milk Marketing Board in 1933 — which guaranteed a market for milk — farmers lost their entrepreneurial edge. Hosier was bought out by one of the big dairies, and his revolutionary system forgotten.

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Today a handful of new pioneers are rediscovering its benefits for consumers and their own profits. In Dorset two young farmer-entrepreneurs — Tom Foot and Neil Griggs — have established a new outdoor herd producing pasture-fed milk. They've designed mobile milking units based on the principles of Hosier's model.

In Somerset new farmer Nick Snelgar is developing a mobile milking-and-processing plant for use by small herds.

His aim is to bring back local, grass-fed milk across Britain. He hopes it'll also create new business opportunities for young people in rural areas.

Between the wars, hard times for milk producers heralded a new golden age for dairy farming.

At the same time it put a wonderful, nutritious food on the doorsteps of austerity Britain.

If the tough times that brought protesting farmers to London have the same impact today, we'll all be winners.

I, for one, can't wait to experience once more the rich, creamy taste of real milk.

- Graham Harvey is author of The Carbon Fields.



Britain's hard-pressed dairy farmers are expected to take to the streets demanding a better deal