

The sun, grass, cow, milk connection

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All PastureLand Cooperative cows come in customary dairy cow colors. And all PastureLand cows are green.

PastureLand Co-op is also green, and a grassroots group as well. Literally. The co-op consists of five southeastern Minnesota dairy farms, each family-run and organic, with cows that graze on pasture grass.

The co-op formed in 1998, organized by several dairy farmers committed to pasture farming. They realized the uniqueness of grass-fed milk, says Michelle Benrud, a PastureLand member and owner from rural Goodhue. They wanted to put that milk into products they owned and could control because they believed a direct link to the products – "their own brand with fewer middlemen" – would increase profits.

PastureLand cows graze on pasture grass and move to fresh pastures as often as every 12 hours. They're natural cows – no genetic engineering involved. No antibiotics or hormones amplify these bovines' growth or milk production.

"Cows are designed to eat a natural diet that consists of pasture grass, not grain," says the co-op's general manager Jean Andreasen. "Raising cows on pasture allows them to grow and mature at a natural pace."

PastureLand Co-op farmers use whole farm methods. "We look at the farm as more than just a money-making enterprise," Benrud says. "When making farm decisions using a whole farm approach, we look at what effects the decision would have on things like the environment, quality of life, the community and profit."

The co-op's approach shows simplicity and logic. It's fundamental. PastureLand calls it the "sun > grass > cow > milk connection." The sun grows the grass which the cows eat and convert into milk, which Pastureland then converts into butter and cheese. "It's a nice integrated system," Andreasen says.

Milk that starts as grass, studies say, tops the grain-based kind. Grass-fed cows produce milk with higher levels of essential fatty acids (Omega 3), conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) and vitamins A, D, E and K2.

Butter makers and Master Cheesemakers in Wisconsin produce PastureLand goods. The co-op's cave-aged cheddars, created at K & K Cheese in Cashton, Wis., do their maturing in Minnesota, in the caves of Faribault Dairy Company.

PastureLand Summer Gold butter has won multiple awards at American Cheese Society competitions, and that nonprofit agency has also honored PastureLand Gouda.

PastureLand's five farms have been certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Further accreditation comes from Food Alliance, a nonprofit that certifies farms for sustainable agricultural and business practices.

The PastureLand system includes rotational grazing – the cows move often to new pastures, every half-day to every three days depending on the pasture's size, to graze on the good stuff – the most tender, freshest forage.

No wonder PastureLand cows like their lifestyle. (Borden's Elsie Cow doesn't own the franchise of contentedness.) "Cows are happiest," Andreasen says, "when they are allowed to do what they have a natural aptitude for."

PastureLand products

You can buy PastureLand Cooperative products locally at Barlow's Plaza Hy-Vee, Good Food Store and Hidden Stream Farm in Elgin, or order direct at pastureland.coop.