

Turner Dairy Farms

Perfect products, perfect service, and treating people right

By Gayle Morrow

How sweet it is! Can you describe the milk *you* drink that way? If it's from Turner Dairy Farms you can. The folks at this national award-winning Pittsburgh-area dairy processor are justifiably proud of the milk in their bottles. Market Director Nicholas Yon says the great taste is due in part to the low bacterial count in the milk.

Federal regulations permit a bacterial count of 300,000 per milliliter in raw milk and 20,000 in pasteurized, he explains; the Turner product averages less than 10,000 in raw and less than 100 in pasteurized.

"We can't do anything to make our milk better," he says. "It is a testament to our farmers and their quality."

Turner Dairy Farms, celebrating its 80th anniversary in 2010, has what Yon describes as "an exclusive partnership" with 50 family farms in Westmoreland, Indiana, Armstrong, and Cambria counties (several of those farms are themselves celebrating anniversaries — 50 years of shipping milk with Turner!).

"We don't get milk from coops or factory farms," Yon says. "Our dairy farmers farm the land and feed the cows."

The company also has partnerships with milk haulers and receives milk seven days a week. Because the milk comes every day, there is never any doubt about

the freshness of the end product. The goal is to have milk bottled and in the stores within 36–48 hours.

"We're setting a higher standard from farm to bottle," Yon continues. "Everybody takes it to heart and you can taste that in the milk." He likes to tell the story of being at a farmers' market and offering an attendee a taste of Turner Dairy Farms milk. The man was a bit dismissive, assuring Yon he knew what milk tasted like.

"He finally tried it, and then he gave me a look of bewilderment. 'It's almost sweet,' he says. That's the low bacterial count. Our milk is not ultra-pasteurized and it doesn't travel much."

Turner Dairy Farms' "rBGH free" milk does find its way to natural food stores in the Pittsburgh area as well as to convenience stores and institutions. Fluid milk makes up the largest portion of the Turner product line; the company also makes sour cream, cottage cheese, juices and iced tea. The drinks are "a function of us having the equipment to do it," Yon notes, adding there is a "huge market" for iced tea in the area.

Founder Charles G. Turner no doubt had the ability to see a marketing potential 80 years ago. Yon characterizes him as "progressive," the son of a dairy farmer



who started out with a couple of cows and a delivery sleigh. Turner Dairy Farms today employs about 140 people. It is a company that is "proud of our long history of supporting local and sustainable agriculture," says Yon. It is a company that believes "milk is not a commodity," that "local buying power goes a long way to preserving trust in local agriculture," and that the high quality of Turner Dairy Farms' milk is "a testament to our farmers."

Now that's sweet. ■

Contact Turner Dairy Farms at 1049 Jefferson Road, Pittsburgh PA 15235, 412-372-2211 or visit www.turnerdairy.net

INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS YON

What is unique about your business?

In 2010 we will be celebrating our 80th anniversary! In that time we have come to realize that what uniquely defines Turner Dairy Farms is our passion for setting a higher standard. This "higher standard" is driven by our diligent focus on responsible procurement from exclusive local family dairy farm partners, a pledge to be "rBGH free," and a true passion for a higher standard of quality from the farm to bottle.

We're proud of our long-standing commitment to supporting local family dairy farms and the personal relationships we share with our dairy farm partners. We understand

the importance that local agriculture has on the socioeconomic fabric of western Pennsylvania. For eighty years we've been committed to focusing our efforts on producing the highest quality dairy products while always being mindful of the preservation of the local agriculture community. We look forward to bringing the highest quality dairy products from local farms to local families for many generations to come.

Why did you join PASA?

We share the same ideals and passion for local, sustainable agriculture that PASA does. PASA continues to work beyond simply promoting local, sustainable agriculture and has taken a proactive approach to education and action in relation to the agriculture community in Pennsylvania. We see PASA as a true resource when it comes to our business.

How has your membership been a benefit to your business?

We've been able to connect with a network of people who share our vision of producing the highest quality products utilizing the agricultural bounty of our immediate area.

What does the term "sustainable" mean to you and how do you incorporate that into your business?

Sustainability to us involves three integrated aspects — ecological preservation, economic viability, and socioeconomic prosperity. From procuring milk from local, self-sustaining farms that effectively use their natural resources, to utilizing energy efficient production practices, "sustainability" remains a part of our company ethos at the farm and processing levels. Our utilization of local family dairy farms helps keep our local economy thriving while also preserving the character and history of our communities. Keeping local family farms profitable benefits not only the local economy, but also the socioeconomic foundation of farming communities.

What do you see as some of the critical issues facing agriculture and ag-related businesses today?

The critical issue facing dairy farming today is economic sustenance. Federal milk prices to dairy farmers are at an all time low and without proper regulation we run the risk of losing many of our local independent family dairy farms. It is simply not viable for independent family dairy farms to continue under these economic conditions.

What do you see as the connection between sustainable ag and the consumer?

The old adage "eating is an agricultural act" aptly applies to this question. No longer are consumers simply viewing eating as an act of sustenance; rather they see it as an intimate connection between farmer, food, and self. Consumers have long sought trust and transparency from their food source. A local, sustainable food system affords them assurance in this realm. The lines between source and consumer become progressively transparent the closer the two are



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together. This is directly correlated to the trust consumers have in local, sustainable agriculture.

We're a business that relies on consumer desire to see food beyond the plate or glass, to understand the *real cost* of food. Consumers see sustainable agriculture as a means for satisfying their connection to the food they eat. It's critical that consumers continue to keep sustainable agriculture at the forefront so the preservation of local family farms is a reality. It's up to consumers to sustain the character and history of their communities and keep local family farms thriving!