

Organic milk in Great Britain

Over 500 dairy farms and 4 per cent of national production



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Dynamic organic producers, innovative management, diversified processing and forward-thinking researchers: here is an interesting overview of organic milk production in Great Britain, following a visit there last spring with a group from Quebec.

Dairy sector in brief

There are currently 12,000 dairy farms in Great Britain. Since the quota system was abolished, in 1994, milk is paid according to volume alone. Over 500 organic dairy farms produce a volume of milk that constitutes 4 per cent of the national production. The premiums paid to producers for organic milk are between 18.5 and 20 per cent more than those for conventional milk. For consumers, however, the price of organic milk is only 15 per cent higher than that of conventional milk. The situation is different in Quebec, where the retail price of organic milk is almost double. The main buyer in the UK is the Organic Milk Suppliers Cooperative (OMSCo), which groups together nearly 500 farms and holds a little over 70 per cent of the market. In Wales, a smaller cooperative, called Calon Wen, is owned by 24 farms. We met with the directors of these two dairies and visited some of the farms that are members. An interesting fact: OMSCo has devoted a few million euros to a television advertising campaign aimed at promoting organic milk.

Farms

The British countryside is extremely picturesque, with fields separated by hawthorn hedges and scattered with flocks of sheep that were already out grazing when we visited. The cows were just beginning to graze, since the season was a bit delayed this year.

Generally speaking, the farms we visited are models of excellent management, and it shows in their results (see Table 1). All of the herds are kept in open housing, either in free stalls or on deeply layered bedding. All the farms make intensive use of pasturelands for their milk production. Although the climate in the UK is obviously not as harsh as ours, many producers have implemented a pasture management system that extends the grazing season. While the humid climate favours grass production, it is a disadvantage for dry hay production. As a result, silages are practically the only conserved forages used on these farms.

The use of hardy breeds and crossbreeding is essential for many of the farms visited. Whether it's Ayrshire or British Friesian, or crosses with hardy breeds, it's clear that using these breeds leads to healthy animals with greater longevity. At Low Sizergh Farm, for example, a three-way cross of British Friesian, Swedish Red and Montbéliarde seems to yield good results. The producer there wanted to use large-size and good production breeds, with a focus on high volume, which is the standard for milk payment. On other farms, the following breeds were also used: Fleckvieh, Norwegian Red, Shorthorn, New Zealand Friesian and Meuse-Rhine-Yssel (MRY). Another reason for using these breeds is to obtain sturdier male calves, which are fattened and sold for meat. In fact, Holstein or Friesian male dairy calves find no takers in Great Britain.

The longevity of these herds, from five to seven lactations per cow, depending on the herd, is remarkable. With very low replacement rates, calving intervals below 400 days, and few health problems overall – and the longevity to prove it – it seems that these dairy operations have hit on a management style that can serve as an example to many farms.

Table 1. A technical snapshot of the organic dairy herds visited

Farm /Town	Cows/ herd	Breed	Average number lactations	Production kg/cow/yr	Fat %	Prot. %	Grazing period (months)	SCC (000)	Concentrates cow/yr (kg)
G. Thorne South Molton	200	Crossbred	n/a*	5000	4.5	3.6	9	250	500
Highgrove Tetbury	180	Ayrshire	6-7	5400	3.9	3.3	6	140	750
Tim Downes Shrewsbury	165	Crossbred	3.6 *	6300	4.3	3.4	9	193	480
Low Sizergh Kendal	160	Crossbred	5	9200	3.9	3.2	7	120	2900
Bwlchwernen Llanybi	60	Ayrshire	6-7	5000	4.19	3.4	6.5	239	600
Clovers Letterston	75	Crossbred	5	6000	n/a	n/a	8	120	1000
Severdale Chepstow	200	Holstein	n/a*	8000	4.1	3.35	7 to 8	210	2500

* Farms that suffered losses due to bovine tuberculosis

Research and expertise

We were able to visit two research centres: Kingshay, an independent centre for applied research, and the Organic Centre Wales.

Based in Glastonbury, Kingshay is a centre of expertise in dairy farming, equipped with a farm for applied research. The centre offers consultant services to more than 4000 organic and conventional dairy farms. The 2000 farms that are registered members of the organization (for an annual fee 450£ or \$675) receive a twice-monthly technical bulletin and have access to research and on-farm trial results as well as telephone consultations. The advisory service covers a wide range of topics including herd management (feeding, health, comfort, etc.), crops, soil management and production costs. Farm trials focus on cubicle design and bedding surfaces, silage corn varieties (yield/production costs), palatable and resistant grass mixtures, cow tracks, and farm equipment comparisons. A team of 18 consultants also offers workshops and training sessions on the same areas covered by the advisory service. Another 6 people make up the applied research team.

The Organic Centre Wales is part of Aberystwyth University, in Wales. This centre has a wide range of activities that include, among others, setting up research projects in organic farming, offering advisory services for agricultural firms, and providing information to consumers. Among many interesting topics: the Aniplan project was initiated to help farmers comply with one of the requirements of organic certification in Great Britain, *i.e.* a health plan. This five-year plan requires that herd health and welfare be assessed and recommendations drawn up. The Aniplan project sets up discussion groups of four or five farmers who then visit the farms of the group members to find solutions to two problems selected by the host farmer. A mediator accompanies the group as a facilitator to ensure that the process runs smoothly. These meetings were a great success with farmers and continued even after the project ended.

Milk processors

The two cooperatives, OMSCo and Calon Wen, both offer a wide variety of products, of course, but in addition to that, many of the farms we visited also process part, if not all, of their milk production. At Laverstoke Park Farm, buffalo milk is used to make traditional mozzarella. At Riverford Farm, milk, butter, cream and yogurt are marketed to 30,000 families, who receive weekly baskets of organic products. At Highgrove Farm, milk from Prince Charles' Ayrshire herd is marketed under its own label: Duchy Originals. Low Sizergh Farm sells part of its production in its own store and restaurant located on the farm, where customers can watch the milking while they enjoy their meal. Finally, half of the milk produced by the Ayrshire herd at Bwlchwernen Fawr, in Wales, is

marketed in the form of one-year aged cheddar. Back in London, the Natural and Organic Products Europe trade show gave us a glimpse of the wide variety of products available to consumers.

The benefits of this fact-finding tour have already been and will continue to be felt by the participants and Quebec's organic dairy production sector as a whole. A detailed account of the trip as well as information about the operations we visited is available (in French) on the Agri-réseau website, under the heading *Agriculture biologique*.

A most rewarding fact-finding tour



Highgrove Farm, in Tetbury, belongs to Prince Charles and is one of the five founding farms of the Organic Milk Suppliers Cooperative (OMSCo), which initiated the sale of organic milk in Great Britain.

Last spring, a group of 15 organic dairy producers and Quebec dairy sector partners took part in a tour focusing on organic milk production in Great Britain. Their 18-day itinerary took them through a good part of the country (see map opposite). The trip was organized by the Victoriaville CEGEP and coordinated by Mr. Denis La France, who acted as a guide and interpreter. Three Valacta advisors were among the participants: Sonia Gosselin and Gratien Tremblay, organic dairy production advisors, and François Labelle, organic dairy production expert, R&D. This undertaking received financial assistance through the MAPAQ programme aimed at supporting the development of organic farming.

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