

dairy innovations

Straus Family Creamery // BY RHEA MAZE

Yellow wildflowers and misty fog frame a dozen cows grazing on the hillside. Each bovine pauses occasionally to chew a mouthful of sweet coastal grasses and, it seems, to take in the tranquil view of Tomales Bay.

"A cow's diet dictates the flavor of its milk," says Albert Straus, owner and president of the Straus Family Creamery in Marshall, California, on the coastal side of Marin County. The region's cool climate and ocean air combine to give Straus' 660 acres of grassland their distinct sweetness. This flavor is praised by fans of Straus' products: fresh milk bottled in recycled glass, slow-churned butter, ice cream, yogurt, and full-fat sour cream.

Straus' cows rotationally graze while the grass is green. When the seasons change and the pastures lose nutrients, the cows are supplemented with a 100 percent organic vegetarian diet. They are not given antibiotics or hormones and are instead treated preventively and homeopathically.

To any observer, it's obvious the Straus cows are happy and healthy. But they are also innovators. At the first of the day's two milkings, the cows step through a solar-powered bug zapper as they enter the barn. At nightfall, they nestle down on insect-resistant beds made of rice hulls. The cows' barns are cleaned twice a day with recycled water. Solids are composted and returned to the land as fertilizer, and liquids are pumped to a covered methane digester that generates the dairy's electricity needs. "It all goes back to the land. We reduce waste and recycle as much as we can," Straus says.

Environmentalism runs in the Straus family. Since 1941, when Bill Straus purchased this dairy, the company's highest priority has been responsible land stewardship. From the beginning, Bill and his wife Ellen, who co-founded the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, implemented innovative, sustainable farming practices. Bill was the first farmer in the area to use decomposed liquid waste as fertilizer. Their son Albert, who now runs the company, has the same passion for the environment. Plus, he loves ice cream.

In college, Albert Straus was approached with a request to

produce organic milk for ice cream. He started the process by devoting his senior thesis at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to the installation and operation of an organic processing plant.

"Since there was no one doing organic at that time, we had to come up with our own ways of doing things," Straus says. In 1994, Straus'



Albert Straus of Straus Family Creamery with two friendly organic milk producers.



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STRAUS CREAMERY

farm became the first certified organic dairy west of the Mississippi.

"We're always looking at ways of doing things better," Straus says. He is currently designing an electric feeding truck so that "the cows start powering the truck that feeds them, to close the loop... Our goal is net-zero [waste and pollution]. It's a challenge, but we're constantly searching and pushing for new technology."

The Straus Family Creamery continues to be the only California milk producer that runs both an organic dairy and an organic creamery. They were the first dairy in North America to become non-GMO verified—two years after developing their own verification process. "When I found out they had strip tests for GMOs, we started testing and found that a lot of certified organic farms were contaminated. Now we're doing our own testing for GMOs to make sure [our milk] is clean," says Straus.

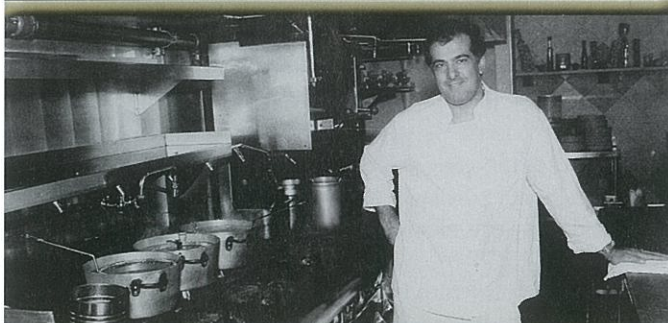
Brie Johnson, the company's sustainability manager, says, "Since sustainability is a journey rather than a destination, making continuous efforts towards improving is essential." She uses a set of metrics created by the Food Trade Sustainability Leadership Association to help her implement new projects, including the latest in "minimum-impact" packaging.

"Communication about [sustainable] practices is increasing, and it is my hope that that more people will share what they are doing and learn from each other," Johnson says.

For more information including recipes, farm stories, and videos, or to find out where Straus products are sold, visit www.strausfamilycreamery.com. ■

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