

Creamery milks its organic ingredients

Rick Nelson, Star Tribune

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There's a bit of Osseo, Wis., in every scoop of Pumphouse Creamery ice cream.

Not that a person can actually gaze into the fizz of a root beer float and discern the Lourdes-like image of Castle Rock Organic Farms. Or its surrounding rural neighborhood, a checkerboard of green fields bordered by long rows of breeze-swaying trees, the rolling vista occasionally punctuated by silver-domed silos and stately red barns.

No, this is a presence more easily discerned by the tastebuds.

There's no mistaking the luscious creaminess that's rooted in the butter pecan, mint chocolate chip, malted vanilla fudge and the Pumphouse's other Norman Rockwell-ish flavors. Racing against the heat to finish a cone on the sunny sidewalk outside Barb Zapzalka's two-year-old shop, it's not difficult to imagine each lick magically shrinking the 100-mile distance between south Minneapolis and Wayne and Carla Kostka's picturesque 500-acre spread.

Barb Zapzalka uses organic milk and cream at the Pumphouse Creamery

Tom Wallace

Star Tribune

In other words, it's all in the milk.

And in this case, milk and cream from pasture-fed cows, a farming practice that results in a more luminous color and finish. Those qualities move to the forefront when Zapzalka converts Castle Rock's nutrient-rich output into ice cream.

"Organic milk is the purest milk available," Zapzalka said. "I've worked with both conventional milk and organic milk, and I can tell the difference. You can put a scoop of each, side by side, and you can tell that the ice cream made with organic milk has more structure, more lift; it won't melt as quickly, either. That's because the milk has more proteins, more minerals than conventional milk."

Those attributes also explain why, despite its top-shelf price (often twice as much as conventional milk), the demand for organic milk is flying through the roof. That's great news for organic dairy farmers, but a headache for Zapzalka, who often has had to scramble for a steady supply; it may not sound like much, but there have been times when fulfilling the pint-sized operation's requirements -- about 100 gallons of liquid gold per week -- has become a tangled tango.

Before hooking up with Castle Rock, Zapzalka had partnered with three dairies,

only to lose her source when their own internal product needs for cream and milk took precedence. Meanwhile, customers kept coming to 48th and Chicago for cones.

"It's been stressful," said Zapzalka.

A steady supply

Castle Rock could not have come along at a more opportune moment. The Kostkas and their 100-head herd had been part of a small cooperative of organic farmers but, after 18 months of research and development, the family decided to strike out on their own and pursue a premium price for their premium grass-fed product. Zapzalka is their first Twin Cities customer.

The family began production earlier this month, with an inventory of 6,000 half-gallon glass bottles and 1950s equipment purchased from a Detroit Lakes, Minn., processor. Buying vintage machinery was their only affordable option; new equipment is an expensive rarity.

"There used to be a lot of on-farm bottling, until pasteurization and homogenization became so bureaucratic," said Wayne Kostka. "Then on-farm bottling became nonexistent."

Until now. Castle Rock and other on-site bottling farmsteads occupy a tiny but expanding dairy business niche. Three years ago, Wisconsin had two such farms; by 2006 the number will jump to eight, nudged by consumer demand.

"There is a growing number of consumers who identify with where their food comes from," said Norm Monsen of the Dairy Business Innovation Center of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture. "People want to know what the farm family is like, or how the cow and the soil are treated. They want to purchase a particular product from a particular region."

So why aren't farmstead bottlers springing up in every rural township? Easy: It's hard. Dairy farming is no cakewalk, and this particular brand of farming piles on additional challenges.

"This is not for the faint of heart," said Paul Hugunin, coordinator of the Minnesota Grown program at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. "You're still producing your product, but now you've got to be at the top of your game in terms of developing customers, and that takes an entirely different skill set, and a great deal of time and energy."

Sort of like ice-cream making. The 20 flavors (18 ice creams, two fruit sorbets) that fill the case in Zapzalka's cheery lavender-and-yellow storefront are the fruits of her labors alone, all prepared in a small, spotless work area just behind the

shop's cash register; a small staff handles the scooping. Not that she's a control freak. "It's more about the personal touch," she said. "And besides, making the ice cream is what I enjoy doing the most."

That rich, lustrous milk isn't the only ingredient that follows Zapzalka's emphasis on local sourcing. Her dazzling strawberry ice cream starts with berries she harvests herself at a White Bear Lake farm.

The addicting brownie-mocha ice cream incorporates sinfully chocolatey brownies from Bakery on Grand in Minneapolis. Chewy oatmeal cookies from A Baker's Wife in Minneapolis are the perfect complement to her velvety vanilla. The foundation for the packs-a-jolt coffee ice cream is a blend from Peace Coffee, a Minneapolis roaster. In the fall, Zapzalka is promising a caramel-apple combo made with fruit from a local orchard. Naturally, she'll pick the apples.

"I very much enjoy having direct contact with farmers," Zapzalka said. "It's so important to support family farms. Not only is it good for the local economy, but everything tastes better, too."

IF YOU GO

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