

The last remaining raw milk dairy

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Ron Garthwaite is the owner of the last raw milk dairy in California, a position he never would have predicted for himself.

"I didn't grow up in agriculture," he said. "Before seeing it done, I could never imagine owning a dairy."

Formerly a geneticist, Garthwaite was working at UC Santa Cruz and the California Academy at Golden Gate Park when he was asked to do some work with Wilder Ranch. There he learned about milking, separating cream and making butter. He found out he liked cows and that led to an interest in the history of dairying.

Soon, people began telling him about Peake's Dairy in Los Gatos.

Ken Peake started his dairy in 1929 and continued to run it the old fashioned way into the 1990's. Garthwaite visited and began working as a volunteer because he wanted to learn. When the milker quit, he took over the job.

Gradually, he began doing more and when it became clear that the dairy would need to move, Garthwaite offered to buy it.

"As I watched the process, I kept thinking to myself 'I can do this'," said Garthwaite. "This isn't hard."

It's clear to the visitor that the tall, soft-spoken Garthwaite has not only become a dairyman, he has embraced the history.

The white walls of his simple house are decorated with old dairy equipment signs. Sipping from his coffee — thinned with sweet, raw milk — he talks of the changes in his life with a calmness and placidity not unlike his beloved cows.

In June of 1997 Garthwaite moved the Claravale dairy to Watsonville. Since then he has exchanged the Guernseys for Jersey cows, built a distribution route and, though still putting the majority of his revenue back into the dairy, he regularly turns a profit.

Garthwaite used a combination of strategies to turn the dairy into a profitable concern.

First, he did as much of the handiwork himself as he could. Second, he raised the prices. Last of all, he set up a distribution system and moved into the stores.

Locally, Claravale Dairy milk is available in New Leaf, Staff of Life and Aptos Natural Foods stores along with Whole Foods Markets throughout the Bay Area. He also distributes to Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and San Diego.

His biggest expenses, as one might expect, are cows and glass bottles. His choice to exchange the Guernsey's for Jersey cows was a marketing decision. "They have the best quality milk. It's the tastiest," said Garthwaite. He said Jerseys are smaller, healthier, live longer and produce less waste than Guernseys. In addition, according to Garthwaite, "They are smarter and more reactive."

Each cow cost roughly \$1,500 each. Unlike the industry standard, he keeps his cows 8 to 12 years.

Because he goes direct to the customer, he has more leeway in how he runs the dairy than a dairy farmer who sells to a co-op or a processor. That lack of marketing pressure means he doesn't have to feed the cows for maximum production, opting instead to feed them for a long life.

The milk is packaged in clear glass bottles reminiscent of the dairies of old. Although the bottles are returnable, there is breakage and



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Dairyman Ron Garthwaite feeds his "babies." Garthwaite separates the calves from the herd as soon as they are weaned from their mothers. He then cares for them until full growth, sells the bulls and returns the heifers to the herd. He hopes this will reduce the chance of Hoof and Mouth disease from spreading to his herd.

often people keep them for various reasons. Garthwaite said he spends about \$5,000 on new bottles every three months or so.

Garthwaite currently has about 60 dairy head, which, he thinks, is just about the right size.

"Any bigger and you lose control of things," he said.

Garthwaite often talks with other dairy farmers who tell him that they envy his smaller herd, but feel forced by the market to 'super size'.

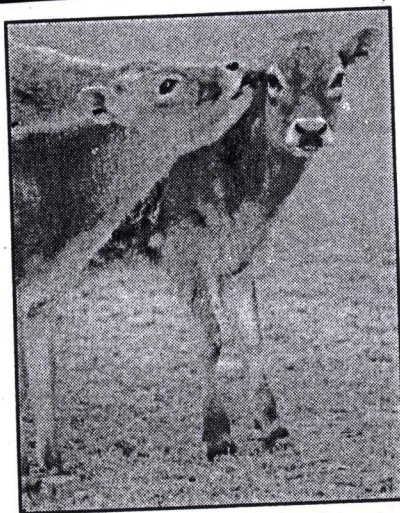
Eventually, Garthwaite wants to double the size of the dairy, but said he would create two smaller herds in order to maintain the integrity he has become so fond of.



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"Bubba," a jersey bull, gets up close and personal with the camera.



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Two of Ron Garthwaite's young calves.

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Originally, he planned to expand in a couple of years by purchasing cows. Now, with the very real threat of hoof and mouth disease, he said he will just raise up his own second herd from the heifer calves that are born to his dairy cows. The time frame works out about the same and he said he feels safer doing it that way.

Asked what has changed the most for him, he thinks for a minute before giving his reply.

"Before the dairy, I was oblivious to the seasons. Now, I watch the seasons change along with the chores — the gardening, pruning, fencework and pond maintenance. I like to watch the look of the place change through the seasons. I can tell what time of year it is by the quality of the muck on the ground."