



by BOB DORAN



THE FAMILY RANCH IN FERNDALE WITH Bob Laffranchi (*In a lot about his past and his family. He'll show you his k your ear off about his own love of the land that brought him back to the Humboldt County dairy industry in the early 1980s after a decade of teaching.*

Then he'll point to the herd of cows -- hundreds of tan Jerseys gazing at you with big, soulful eyes, contentedly munching grass in the pasture. That love of the land and cows has a lot to do with why Laffranchi is now making organic cheese, along with his already successful line of premium commercial

cheddars and jacks, at his cheese factory in Loleta. Laffranchi, in fact, is a pioneer of sorts. He has the distinction of being the first in California to produce certified organic cheese.

"I tell people, if you decide to go organic, you must believe in the concept," said Laffranchi, who owns and operates the Loleta Cheese Factory with his wife, Carol. *(In color photo at top)*

With increased documentation requirements, stringent regimens for cleaning and sanitizing equipment and premium prices for organically certified milk, making organic cheese can be a big headache. He is required to double rinse all of the cheesemaking equipment with organic certified sanitizers again. He makes sure the truck driver who delivers the milk faithfully documents every stop on his trip from dairy to factory. He constantly measures the temperature of the milk and documents the exact amount of cheese the liquid milk volume should produce.

But for Laffranchi, who began making organic cheese five years ago for a creamery in the Bay Area and just last year launched his own Loleta brand organic, the hassle is worth it -- because of the cows.

"I like cows. I like working with them and I like walking through a group of them and knowing they've been treated right."

As to the factory's reputation for high quality, Laffranchi is justifiably proud.



"I wouldn't trade my cheese for any other cheese out there," he said. "People walk in, look at our cheese being made and taste it there. They have a sense of where their food comes from and they like that."

Visitors can watch at the plate-glass window as workers supervise the transformation from milk to curds, waiting for the enzymes -- called rennets -- that curdle the milk to complete their work. Then the curds are taken out and pressed into blocks of cheese and set aside for aging. Have any questions? There's always someone on hand to explain the old-fashioned you'll even understand what they're saying.



Supervising the transformation from milk to curds, before the curds are pressed into blocks.

Visitors to the factory can watch the cheesemaking through a plate-glass window.



If you still have doubts about the integrity of the procedure, you can always walk over to the display case and have a sample -- the sharp bite of aged Fontina, the dusky cream of smoked salmon cheddar or the rich, hearty taste of Havarti with dill.

Laffranchi said the small size of the factory gives him the flexibility to work at the cheese's pace, which is critical in the production of premium cheese. The factory can make batches of cheese as small as 600 pounds, whereas large-scale operations usually make cheese in 6,000-pound batches.

"In big factories," Laffranchi said, "you have to be on time," regardless of whether the cheese in the vat has had enough time to reach its optimal flavor. He said that if the rennets are taking bit more time than expected to do their work, the Loleta factory can wait. Conversely, if they're working fast, they speed up. The cheese is the boss, he said.

The commitment to labor-intensive, hand-made quality made the decision to add organic cheeses to the Loleta production line easier, Laffranchi said.

There are also issues particular to the rennets used in organic cheese that make it difficult to produce in an industrial setting. Traditionally, cheese was fermented using calf rennet, which is extracted from the stomach linings of young cows. That would in theory be organic, but because "a large percentage of organic consumers are vegetarian, it is not a practical option," Laffranchi said. A logical alternative would be chymax, a rennet produced by genetically modified bacteria. However, while chymax is vegetarian, it isn't organic.



That leaves *mucor miehei*, sometimes called vegetable rennet. *Mucor miehei* is an enzyme produced by naturally occurring bacteria, both organic and vegetarian. The only problem is that the enzyme can be a little bit ticklish to deal with. Laffranchi said it does not always break down in the cheese and sometimes left a bitter flavor, especially in sharp cheeses that must be aged

longer. The only solution is to carefully shepherd the cheese through the production process, making sure the enzyme reaches the point where it provides the best flavor. And that means time.

"We've aged out some of our sharp organic cheddar using vegetable rennet and they are

outstanding because of the detail we use. We only put in the exact amount of rennet needed to do the job and the cultures we use are slow." The result, Laffranchi said, "is a creamier texture and a much cleaner flavor."

How did Laffranchi get started in the organic movement?

Five years ago the demand for organic whole milk, which costs considerably more than conventional to produce, was not big enough to absorb all the milk produced by the Petaluma-based Strauss Family Creamery, owned by Vivien Strauss and her brother, Albert. At the time, they were selling the extra milk at a loss by marketing it along with conventional milk. That's when they turned to the Loleta Cheese for help. They chose Laffranchi because of his established commitment to producing high-quality cheese.

Vivien Strauss says organic farming is about responsibility.

"It's being responsible to the land," she said in a telephone interview from Petaluma. That means lowering the number of cows per acre of pasture so that the land doesn't erode, and not adding chemicals to the environment. She said that while most dairies don't use very much pesticides or fertilizers, the feed that cows eat is grown using large amounts of chemicals and could even be genetically modified.

At Strauss Family, grass from the pasture is supplemented with organic grain and silage and a fermented mix of vegetables. Again, all feed for an organic dairy must have a paper trail to certify its authenticity.



 isn't limited to the relationship between the farmer and the land. It also means being responsible to people, she said. One way the Strauss dairy protects consumers is by not using antibiotics.

"There are something like 30 antibiotics which have been approved for use in dairies," she said. By concentrating on preventative health, her dairy has found they can avoid most antibiotics. "Promote the health of the cow and she won't get infections as easily," Vivien said.

Some day Laffranchi hopes to be able to use local organic milk to produce his line of organic cheeses. Today that's not possible -- there aren't any organic dairies in Humboldt County -- but that's about to change.

Dave Petersen, who runs a dairy in Loleta, said he is just two months away from being certified organic.

"I initiated the conversion in October of 1999," he told the *Journal* last week.

Petersen said that his style of dairy farming, like Laffranchi's style of making cheese, is more compatible with organic methods.

"We were doing a lot of it already," he said. He'd never used commercial fertilizers and had only used herbicides on the fencelines surrounding his pastures.

"The major part of the change has been paperwork and antibiotics. I'm doing it for the higher prices, but it's also basically how my grandparents did it."

While tradition is important to Petersen, it's more than just preserving his grandfather's farming techniques. He sees organic farming as a way to preserve his family farm. With just 100 cows, his dairy is too small an operation for today's farming economy.

"I'm 55 years old and if I didn't go organic, the farm would be gone in 10 years. Hopefully, this way when I retire, the dairy will remain viable."

It's a trend that may be catching on. Humboldt County has many small dairies using primarily traditional methods that have trouble competing with large industrial dairy farms in the Central Valley.

"When I first jumped at going organic, I got about nine months of negative feedback from the dairy community around here. But that's changing," Petersen said. "I think it's coming around because the price of milk is so low. If farmers can't make a living, they'll have to leave the land."

For Petersen, all that remains for his conversion to organic is to put organic feed in his grain tanks and have the certification inspection.

With higher costs, regulation and uncertainty, Petersen warned that organic milk production "is not for everyone."

Laffranchi agrees. And although their own dairy is not organic at this time, he listed several reasons why it's still a good idea -- and the wave of the future.

"It encourages people to think out of the box," he said. "Health issues for cows do not go away, but a lot of the tools of conventional farming do, so you have to find ways to prevent disease. Your husbandry skills have to be better. You can't use commercial fertilizer, so you have to learn to use manure."

For both dairies and cheese manufacturers, organic is definitely a growth industry. Ten years ago, Laffranchi said, you had to go to a natural food store to find any organic dairy products.

"Today that's changed. We have excellent placement at Ray's and other independent food stores in the area. (Murphy's, Co-op, Wildberries and Eureka Natural Foods). The organic customer is no longer limited in where they can find organic products."

And consumers are becoming more interested in organic products, he said.

"The discussion in the media about what organic means has helped," Laffranchi said, but the real reason is because of a growing sophistication in consumer tastes.

"We're following where the wine industry has gone. Once upon a time, people who wanted wine would get a bottle with a screwcap. Now you walk into a restaurant and see people drinking a good merlot. I think we'll find people who can enjoy an organic brie, Camembert or asiago. Right now people want sharp cheddar cheese. In 20 years they will hopefully be looking for a sharp gouda as well."

Much of that growth will come from production facilities like his, he predicted.

"The strength of organic cheeses will come from small manufacturers," Laffranchi said, because of their flexibility. And Loleta Cheese is banking on the trends toward higher quality and toward organic to continue.

"In 10 years, if we do our job well, our company will look very different than it does today."



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