

Stay Away From This Brand of Organic Dairy

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Some organic dairies are nothing more than CAFOs in disguise, selling higher-priced milk that is scarcely different from conventional CAFO dairy
- › Aurora Organic Dairy in Colorado keeps 15,000 cows that are supposed to have access to pasture for the entire grazing season, but a Washington Post investigation revealed 90% were kept on feedlots, not pasture, at any given time
- › Nutritionally, the milk from Aurora Organic Dairy resembled conventional milk, not organic, grass fed milk

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In the U.S., organic dairy brings in about \$6 billion in sales annually.¹ Consumers pay a premium for the milk expecting they are getting a superior product. Organic milk (and meat) from cows raised primarily on pasture have been repeatedly shown to be higher in many nutrients, including vitamin E, beta-carotene and beneficial conjugated linoleic acid (CLA).

Organic milk also contains about 25% less omega-6 fats and 62% more omega-3 fats than conventional milk,² and the animals, when given appropriate access to pasture, are raised in a more humane environment than cows raised on CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations).

Unfortunately, not all organic dairy is created equal, and just seeing the USDA organic label on a gallon of milk is not enough to verify its quality (or lack thereof). An

investigation by The Washington Post revealed that some organic dairies are nothing more than CAFOs in disguise, selling higher-priced milk that is scarcely different from conventional CAFO dairy.

Milk From Large Organic Dairies May Not Be as Organic as Promised

When the Post visited Aurora Organic Dairy in Colorado, the company that provides organic store brands to corporations like Walmart, Target and Costco, a few problems were evident right off the bat. For starters, the farm is massive, housing 15,000 cows, "making it more than 100 times the size of a typical organic herd," the Post noted.

Further, organic standards require that cows have free access to certified organic pasture for the entire grazing season, but there are large loopholes in the requirement.

As Aurora spokeswoman Sonja Tuitele told the Post, "The requirements of the USDA National Organic Program allow for an extremely wide range of grazing practices that comply with the rule."³ The Post investigation indeed revealed that Aurora Organic Dairy appears to be stretching the limits of the rule:⁴

"... [D]uring visits by The Washington Post to Aurora's High Plains complex across eight days last year, signs of grazing were sparse, at best. Aurora said its animals were out on pasture day and night, but during most Post visits the number of cows seen on pasture numbered only in the hundreds.

At no point was any more than 10 percent of the herd out. A high-resolution satellite photo taken in mid-July by DigitalGlobe, a space imagery vendor, shows a typical situation — only a few hundred on pasture."

The Post even had samples of Aurora's organic milk tested for "a key indicator of grass-feeding" (its fatty acid profile), which revealed the milk matched conventional, not organic milk. Adding to the problem, farmers are allowed to hire their own inspectors in order to be certified USDA Organic.

In Aurora's case, the Post investigation revealed the inspectors had visited the farm outside of the grazing season, which means they had no way of knowing whether the dairy's grazing habits met the organic requirement. In 2007, the USDA even sanctioned Aurora Organic Dairy for willfully violating organic standards, but the farm was allowed to continue operating after a settlement was reached.

Half of the Organic Milk Sold in the US May Come From CAFOs

It's very much a buyer beware market when it comes to organic dairy. Theoretically, choosing organic milk makes sense, but this holds true only if the farmers are giving the cows actual free access to pasture. Mark Kastel, co-director of the nonprofit Cornucopia Institute, told the Post that right now, "About half of the organic milk sold in the U.S. is coming from very large factory farms that have no intention of living up to organic principles."⁵ It's a widespread problem.

When the Post visited seven other large organic dairies in 2015 (these located in Texas and New Mexico), they found the cows were primarily kept on feedlots, not pastures. Cornucopia also noted that aerial photography, backed up by satellite imagery, from 14 "industrial scale" organic livestock operations revealed "few if any animals" out on pasture.⁶

As a result of the Post investigation, Cornucopia has filed legal complaints against Aurora Dairy and Colorado Department of Agriculture, their organic certifier. They've also asked for the removal of the USDA's lead organic regulator, Miles McEvoy. Kastel explained:⁷

"The rigorous investigative work by Peter Whoriskey at The Washington Post clearly illustrates a pattern of long-term corruption by both Aurora Dairy and the USDA's National Organic Program. Our organic regulators have turned a blind eye as giant industrial operations place ethical family-scale dairy farmers at a distinct competitive disadvantage."

... These gross violations of the law were well-documented in a series of complaints we filed against Aurora operations in Texas, and other 'organic' CAFOs in the U.S., as well as their certifiers that have languished at the USDA for over a year and a half without enforcement action."

What's Better Than Organic? Grass Fed

Unfortunately, the USDA certified organic label is not the last word on food quality. Until the loopholes are closed and the standards adjusted to ensure dairy cows receive regular access to pasture, you've got to do your homework to ensure your favorite organic dairy brand isn't ripping you off.

There are organic dairies out there that are doing it right, like Raw Farm USA, which provides organic raw milk from cows that graze 365 days a year, going above and beyond the organic standard.

They call their milk "grass-grazed" as opposed to "grass fed," the latter of which they point out could mean virtually anything, like "grazed at some point," leading to milk with questionable nutritional value.⁸ As it stands, dairy can be sold as "grass fed" whether the cows ate solely grass or received silage, hay or even grains during certain times.

Fortunately, the American Grassfed Association (AGA) introduced much-needed grass fed standards and certification for American-grown grass fed dairy,⁹ which will allow for greater transparency and conformity.¹⁰ As reported by Organic Authority:¹¹

"The new regulations are the product of a year's worth of collaboration amongst dairy producers like Organic Valley as well as certifiers like Pennsylvania Certified Organic and a team of scientists.

'We came up with a standard that's good for the animals, that satisfies what consumers want and expect when they see grass fed on the label, and that is economically feasible for farmers,' says AGA's communications director Marilyn Noble of the new regulations."

Considering how important a cow's diet is when it comes to the quality of its milk, especially when we're talking about raw milk, as well as the potential for [grasslands](#) to restore health and diversity to the environment, I would strongly advise you to ensure your dairy is AGA certified as grass fed.

Why Grass Fed Dairy Is Supreme

There are a number of reasons to seek out grass fed dairy products. For foodies, the seasonal variations in flavor are a huge draw. For the health-conscious, milk from cows raised primarily on pasture has been shown to be higher in many nutrients, including vitamin E, beta-carotene and the healthy fats omega-3 and CLA.¹²

On an environmental level, grass fed dairy has a considerably reduced footprint compared to the way most dairy is produced on CAFOs. Farms producing grass fed dairy products are able to naturally regenerate the soil and maintain ecological balance without relying on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. And on an ethical level, cows are designed to eat grass.

When they eat corn and grain, not only does the quality of their milk degrade but they live in a state of chronic inflammation, which increases their risk of infection and disease. When a cow eats grains in a CAFO instead of the grasses they were designed to eat, three adverse events happen:

1. The cow becomes acidotic (acidic) as a result of using glucose from the grains as their primary fuel rather than short-chain fatty acids derived from the nondigestible fibers in the grasses.
2. It becomes over-protonated, which harms the cow's kidneys. As a result, the cow can only provide milk for 1.7 lactations, which is 44 months, after which they get slaughtered.
3. Grain can contain mold mycotoxins that can make the animal sick.

So while organic, raw grass fed dairy is ideal, keep in mind that the grass fed portion should be non-negotiable. You may find grass fed dairy farmers who have not yet gone

through (or who cannot afford to go through) the USDA's organic certification process. In that case, speak to the farmer directly to find out how the animals are raised.

Cornucopia's Organic Dairy Scorecard

Getting your **raw milk** from a local organic grass fed farm or co-op is best, but if you're considering milk from another source, check out Cornucopia's Organic Dairy Scorecard.¹³ The Cornucopia Institute is an organic industry watchdog whose core constituencies are family farmers across the U.S. and consumers concerned about the availability and quality of organic foods. Their goal is to empower you to make informed purchasing decisions.

You might be surprised to see many big-name organic brands that rank near the bottom of the list, even receiving a "zero" rating. In this case, it's not worth your money to pay for an "organic" product that's likely no better than conventional.

You'd be better served by supporting the ethical farms that received a 4- or 5-cow rating instead (meaning their farming practices are either excellent or outstanding). While you'll certainly notice the difference in flavor when purchasing truly grass fed, organic dairy, you can even see the difference.

Grass fed, organic milk tends to be yellowish, not pure white. The coloration comes from the natural antioxidant carotenoids found in the grass, which is a precursor to vitamin A. When cows are raised on dried grass or hay, as opposed to fresh-growing grass, you end up with a whiter product, which is an indication of reduced carotenoid and antioxidant content.

'So-Called Organic Milk' Pushing Real Organic Farmers Out of Business

If you're not a dairy farmer, you may not be aware that we're in the midst of a massive milk glut. Thanks to the unnatural efficiency of swiftly growing dairy CAFOs, milk supply has outpaced demand, causing milk prices to tank. This is even true of organic milk.

John Boere, a California dairy farmer, used to be an organic farmer but was unable to find a market for his milk, forcing him to switch back to conventional farming at a steep loss. He told Cornucopia:¹⁴

"The surplus of milk is so bad here in California that some organic handlers are being forced to divert organic milk onto the conventional market, at a substantial loss. This contributes to the crumbling farm-gate pricing, and for some, like me, being forced out of organic altogether.

... If all organic dairies were forced to get 30 percent of their dry matter intake (feed) from pasture, as the law requires, there would be a shortage of organic milk, not a surplus!"

Another small organic farm in Wisconsin told Cornucopia they've lost about 30% of their income due to the "so-called organic milk" glut. Simply by getting informed about what's really going on at the organic farms you support, you can directly support the farmers who are raising cows the right way while voting against the rest.

How to Support the 'Real' Organic Dairy Farmers

As Kastel put it, "Shoppers can vote in the marketplace ... There is a higher authority than the USDA, or even the federal courts, and that's the consumer dollar." The Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance (NODPA) responded to the Post investigation, understandably concerned that the headlines knocking organic dairy would tarnish the images of ethical, small family farms producing organic dairy the right way.

How can you tell the difference among the organic brands of milk at your supermarket? In addition to using Cornucopia's dairy scorecard, Liz Bawden, New York organic dairy farmer and NODPA president, suggests:¹⁵

"I can't guarantee that the milk in your carton comes from a family farm that has values and not from one owned by a group of investors in Boston, but check the plant code on the top of the containers to make sure it's not 08-29 (Aurora

Dairy) [and] choose name-brand over generic or store brand organic dairy products (as they have a reputation to preserve)."

American Grassfed Association – The goal of the American Grassfed Association is to promote the grass fed industry through government relations, research, concept marketing and public education.

Their website also allows you to search for AGA-approved producers certified according to strict standards that include being raised on a diet of 100% forage; raised on pasture and never confined to a feedlot; never treated with antibiotics or hormones; and born and raised on American family farms.

EatWild.com – EatWild.com provides lists of farmers known to produce raw dairy products as well as grass fed beef and other farm-fresh produce (although not all are certified organic). Here you can also find information about local farmers markets, as well as local stores and restaurants that sell grass fed products.

Weston A. Price Foundation – Weston A. Price has local chapters in most states, and many of them are connected with buying clubs in which you can easily purchase organic foods, including grass fed raw dairy products like milk and butter.

Grassfed Exchange – The Grassfed Exchange has a listing of producers selling organic and grass fed meats across the U.S.

Local Harvest – This website will help you find farmers markets, family farms and other sources of sustainably grown food in your area where you can buy produce, grass fed meats and many other goodies.

National Farmers Markets Directory – A national listing of farmers markets.

Eat Well Guide: Wholesome Food From Healthy Animals – The Eat Well Guide is a free online directory of sustainably raised meat, poultry, dairy and eggs from farms, stores, restaurants, inns, hotels and online outlets in the United States and Canada.

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) – CISA is dedicated to sustaining agriculture and promoting the products of small farms.

The Cornucopia Institute – The Cornucopia Institute maintains web-based tools rating all certified organic brands of eggs, dairy products and other commodities, based on their ethical sourcing and authentic farming practices separating CAFO "organic" production from authentic organic practices.

RealMilk.com – If you're still unsure of where to find raw milk, check out Raw-Milk-Facts.com and **RealMilk.com**. They can tell you what the status is for legality in your state, and provide a listing of raw dairy farms in your area. The Farm to Consumer Legal Defense Fund¹⁶ also provides a **state-by-state review of raw milk laws**.¹⁷ In California, **Raw Farm**, formerly Organic Pastures, is licensed to sell raw dairy products.

Sources and References

- ¹ The Washington Post May 1, 2017
- ^{2, 3, 4, 5} PLOS One December 9, 2013
- ^{6, 7, 14} The Cornucopia Institute May 2, 2017
- ⁸ Raw Farm USA
- ⁹ American Grassfed December 21, 2016
- ¹⁰ Civil Eats January 4, 2017
- ¹¹ Organic Authority January 6, 2017
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- ¹³ Cornucopia Organic Dairy Scorecard May 8, 2017
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- ¹⁷ Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund, State by State Review of Raw Milk Laws (Archived)