

## The new milky way

*New dairy brands are giving the health conscious easy access to premium organic milk, says Aarti Dua : The Telegraph*

When Michelle Bauer Chamberlain moved from South Africa to India three years ago, she hated the taste of the pouch milk that she poured on her muesli each morning. Nor did she like the Tetrapak milk that she switched to after reading reports on adulterated milk. Then she discovered Pride of Cows, a premium farm-fresh cow's milk brand, at a Pune farmer's market some months ago.



"It's got a great taste. And I don't have to worry about the quality anymore," says Chamberlain, who manufactures the Good Juicery range of sparkling fruit juices.

Chamberlain's not the only one who's discovering the joys of fresh-from-the-farm, as-organic-as-you-can-get cow's milk in India. From Mumbai to Gurgaon and Bangalore to Chennai, a number of entrepreneurs have come up, who deliver premium cow's milk from the farm to the doorstep.

They're promising that your early morning glass of nutrition is healthy and tasty and that it isn't adulterated with detergents or laden with hormones. They're catering to the growing tribe of health-conscious Indians who want the healthiest food on their tables — and who're willing to pay a premium for it. Keep in mind that organic milk is priced from Rs 50 to over Rs 80 a litre.



Indian School of Business classmates Rahul Jain (seated) and Anmol Trikannad have launched their Doctor Moo certified organic cow's milk in Mumbai recently; Pic: Gajanan Dudhalkar

So over a month ago, Indian School of Business (ISB) classmates Rahul Jain, 27, and Anmol Trikannad, 30, launched their Doctor Moo brand of certified organic milk in Mumbai. They've tied up with an organic dairy farm near Pune to deliver their milk from Bandra to Juhu at Rs 60 a litre. "Our aim is to enable the best quality dairy products to be made in India," says IIT engineer and former banker Jain. Adds Trikannad, the "Bandra boy" who grew up and studied to be an engineer in New Zealand: "We're implementing the gold standards in milk with Doctor Moo."

Moreover, Sarda Farms, which first introduced its farm-fresh cow's milk in Nashik a year ago, has just launched in Mumbai this month. "We're a passion-driven and not a numbers-driven project," says Shrirang Sarda, who heads the bidi-to-real estate Sarda group. Sarda Farms' milk is packaged in recyclable glass bottles and comes in four variants like raw, pasteurised and skimmed.

To be sure, the market for farm-fresh milk is still minuscule and niche. But Devendra Shah, chairman of the Rs 1,200-crore Parag Milk Foods, which owns the Gowardhan milk and Go cheese brands and who was the first mover with his Pride of Cows brand in 2010, says: "There's a growing base of consumers who're asking for organic milk. We haven't even tapped one per cent of this market." Shah launched Pride of Cows, which has celebrity customers like Sachin Tendulkar, by invitation only in South Mumbai first. It's now available across Mumbai and Pune.



The team at Sarda Farms in Nashik is pampering its cows with everything from the best organic feed to motion-sensitive massagers to produce the best milk possible

There are other farm-fresh milk players too. In Gurgaon, the information technology-to-real estate Landmark Group has won over customers with its WhollyCow certified organic milk in the last 18 months. "You'll find hardly any farm-fresh milk across urban India. We felt there's a need for it so we came up with the idea," says Sandeep Chhillar, chairman, Landmark Group.



Former commercial pilot and trainer Sanjay Sharma, who worked in the Netherlands and the US before returning to India eight years ago, has also been converting milk-hating kids to milk-guzzling ones with his Milk Company brand in Gurgaon since 2012. "I want to provide good milk for children and good ghee for pujas," he says.

Meanwhile, in Chennai, textile exporter Rakesh Ravindran and his father M. Ravindran have been selling their Astra Dairy Farms' raw cow's milk for over a year. "Our aim is to provide milk that's on

par with Western countries. For what you get in India is not milk, they only claim it's milk," says Rakesh Ravindran.

And in Bangalore, G.N.S. Reddy's Akshayakalpa Farms and Foods has also been delivering its Akshayakalpa cow's milk, which is produced at organically managed farms near Bangalore.



New farm-fresh milk brands like Astra Dairy Farms in Chennai and Milk Company in Gurgaon (above right) are winning over health-conscious customers across India

The new producers are milking the growing demand for healthy food. After all, according to a survey by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India in 2011, 70 per cent of the milk sold across India is adulterated with everything from water and skimmed milk powder to urea and detergent.

The players are focusing on cow's milk as it's considered healthier because of its low fat content. They're confident their product is superior too. After all, the traditional milk system has several ills. For one, dairies collect milk from hundreds of farmers. "It could be a mix of cow, buffalo, goat or even camel's milk," says Sharma. Then, the animals are injected with hormones and the milk has a high bacterial content.



The Landmark Group's Sandeep Chhillar says customers love its WhollyCow milk produced from its state-of-the-art automated farm near Gurgaon



On the other hand, the new players are controlling everything from the fodder to the last-mile delivery. They've set up state-of-the-art dairy farms with Holstein Friesian cows — they don't inject hormones and separate sick cows from the milking — and automated milking systems that ensure no hand or air contact since the milk is piped directly from the udders to the chilling and pasteurisation units.

They're also pampering their cows with everything from the best organic feed and reverse osmosis water to rubber mats in the barns to protect the cows and water sprays to cool them down. Milk Company's Sharma is even building a swimming pool for his cows.

Think Dairy





The Landmark Group's Sandeep Chhillar says customers love its WhollyCow milk produced from its state-of-the-art automated farm near Gurgaon

Take Shah, who entered the dairy business in 1992. He set up his 45-acre Bhagyalaxmi Dairy at Manchar near Pune in 2006 as a research farm to showcase it to his export customers. "I wanted to show that we can produce international quality milk in India," he says.

So he applied the cow comfort principles he'd seen on farms abroad. "Happy cows give better milk," says Shah, who has invested over Rs 35 crore on the farm, which has 4,000 cows and an automated rotary milking parlour. "I soon realised that we were producing superior quality milk here. And since consumers in cities like Mumbai are always worried about the adulteration in their children's milk, I introduced the farm-to-home concept," he adds.

Pride of Cows, which is priced at Rs 80 a litre, has 9,000 daily customers in Mumbai and Pune. "We've got a great response," says Shah.

At Sarda Farms too, they're using the latest technology. Every cow has an RFID tag so its yield is recorded everytime it's milked and an alert is sent out if there's an unnatural drop.

Sarda first looked at setting up a dairy almost 10 years ago because of the synergies between the group's bidi and dairy businesses since both are based on collections. But he dropped the idea as he wasn't sure he could deliver a differentiated high-quality product.

Then, four years ago he took the plunge. "We said, 'Let's become farmers ourselves' and see if we can approach it from the other end and solve a big problem — of our food supply chain," he says.

So he set up Sarda Farms with the "best-in-class facilities". Today, he has 700 cows on 20 acres and another 30 acres of open land. He's even got motion-sensitive massagers for the cows — the brushes start rotating as soon as a cow approaches. Plus, he has GPS trackers on his delivery trucks so that they stall if they deviate from their prescribed route.

Sarda Farms currently produces 7,000 litres a day and has over 1,000 customers in Nashik. Now, it's entered Mumbai. "We will never compromise on quality," says Sarda.

Meanwhile, the Landmark group has also pulled out the big bucks to set up its 250-acre Landmark Dairy with 1,200 cows near Gurgaon. Says Chhillar: "The idea came from my brother Amit, who having lived abroad, was used to high-quality milk."

So Amit even moved to India for two years to set up the high-tech farm. The Chhillars launched their Rs 70-a-litre WhollyCow milk in mid-2012 in Gurgaon, but it's now available in South Delhi and Faridabad and has over 1,500 customers. It comes in whole, toned and skimmed variants and there's also WhollyCow ghee and curds. Chhillar admits that financial viability is tough given the high cost of producing organic milk and the consumer's price sensitivity. But he says: "We enjoy the brand and whoever drinks our milk loves it."

Meanwhile, Sharma and his partners too have invested almost Rs 35 crore on their free-range cow farms in Gurgaon and Alwar. "I was moving to Australia because I wanted to provide the best to my three children. But my guruji persuaded me to stay back and do social good in India," he says. So since he felt there was a dire lack of good milk in India, he decided to venture in and launch his Milk Company brand.

His farms produce 3,000 litres milk a day. But he now plans to enter Delhi and expand from 1,000 customers today to 5,000 customers in a year.

Not all the players are looking at big operations though. Doctor Moo's Jain and Trikannad have tied up with an existing farm. The two actually conceived their venture as a project at ISB. Jain had quit his Deutsche Bank job in the Far East to return home as the "entrepreneurial bug" bit him. And Trikannad, who was working with Air New Zealand, too decided to try his hand at ventures in India. So they launched the company after completing their MBAs at ISB.

"The market is nascent but it's growing," says Jain. And Trikannad feels their milk's quality speaks for itself. "It has re-energised our consumers' belief in good milk almost overnight," he says.

Meanwhile, in Chennai, Ravindran has also tasted success with his Astra Dairy's raw milk. Astra produces only 450 litres milk daily. But Ravindran's now expanding. He plans to add 100 cows in six months besides installing a pasteurisation unit. "We charge Rs 60 but we have loyal customers who appreciate our quality," he says.

Pride of Cows' Shah too plans to double his customer base over the next year. But he says: "We have a limited quantity so we want to grow gradually."

The premium milk business poses several challenges, of course, not the least of which are quality, distribution and awareness. Also, milk is a perishable. Rashmi Bhansali, who owns the Ehsaas Organic Farms near Delhi, tried selling raw organic milk but gave it up because of spoilage issues and high costs. "Milk is difficult to handle. But people want organic milk badly," she says.

No wonder, the new entrepreneurs insist on owning and controlling every operation themselves. They're confident of success too. After all, as Sarda says: "We've put out the honey, the bees will come."