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## Got Milk?

### Saving Simsbury's Last Dairy Farm

By LAURA MAZZA-DIXON

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Town Farm Dairy lies in the far northeast corner of Simsbury, between the old railroad bed and the Simsbury airport. At this end of town you won't find fancy new shops or three-story houses with wide curving drives. You will find unused tobacco barns, abandoned farmhouses and an industrial park or two.

If you don't drive too fast down Wolcott Road, you will see a few Jersey cows grazing in the land that lies low along the Farmington River and an unobtrusive sign hanging by a chain between two posts. Just there, behind the newly renovated boarding house, look for some old red barns and a little white house with a bench in front of the vegetable garden. As you come down the drive, slow down. The dogs, Dermott and Dru, who sleep in the sun until it is time to round up the cows, may run out to greet you.

Though it is a sleepy little farm, well off the beaten track, many people in the Farmington River Valley are asking what they can do to help save it. Why do they care?

First of all, it is the milk and milk products from the brown-eyed Jersey cows. Town Farm Dairy was known throughout the Northeast for its success in processing milk, yogurt, cheese, ice cream and eggnog on site. The cows are not given any bovine growth hormones. They are put out to graze on land that is certified organic. The milk was sold in old-fashioned, returnable, glass bottles. The yogurt was unforgettable, and the cream from Jersey cows unbelievably rich. Just ask any of the 400 or so customers who had become accustomed to their weekly visits to the farm or home deliveries from the farm.

Unfortunately, the processing facility had to close last year. The farmer, Bill Walsh, sold two thirds of his herd with the intention of closing down for good.

The customers of the dairy tend to be people who seek out locally produced food for their families and who prefer to support farmers who use environmentally sound methods. When they heard that the farm was phasing out of production they started a group called Friends of Town Farm Dairy in the hope of keeping it in operation.

There are now nearly 500 people on our mailing list. Beyond the food, we want to save the farm because it adds to the visual appeal, the charm, the open space, of the town. It's a small business. Finally, it's a potential educational resource for the community.

Town Farm Dairy is the last milking dairy in a town that once was home to dozens of dairy farms. The town of Simsbury owns the property, which was given by Amos Eno to the town as a poor farm in 1883. Since

the nature of the original deed was to have the farm serve the needy members of the community, the idea of a community farm with a charitable purpose seemed to make sense.

So FTFD conducted a survey of community farms throughout New England. We found models of how to combine educational, charitable and historical preservation goals with the actual working farm as the centerpiece. Holcomb Farm in Granby, deeded to the town for agricultural and educational purposes by the Holcomb family, is one example of a community-based farm successfully administered to link farm preservation to inner-city needs.

Community-supported agriculture has become a popular means of preserving small farms and allowing people who do not own property suitable for farming a chance to participate in the hands-on process of planting and harvesting. While dairy farming requires more highly skilled labor, and the way the community is involved may be a little different, the goal would be the same. With sensible planning and strong support from the community, small farms that would otherwise have disappeared from the landscape have been able to survive. Could this small farm be one of them?

Many months of intensive organizing later, with pro bono help from the Connecticut Urban Legal Initiative, the Friends of Town Farm Dairy has applied for nonprofit status. The Connecticut branch of the Northeast Organic Farming Association has agreed to serve as fiscal agent in the meantime so that donations will be tax deductible.

The business plan, which gained the support of Simsbury's board of selectmen in July, involves FTFD leasing the property from the town and hiring the current farmer to manage it.

We hope to reopen the farm next fall, selling milk that is certified organic. To do this, the Friends need to raise \$30,000 toward the purchase of the processing equipment. For the dairy to return to full production, with a herd of 37 cows, FTFD will need to raise an additional \$120,000 over the next three years. The fund-raising campaign will begin with a benefit concert of Appalachian folk music by Susan Trump, called "My Grandfather's Barn," at 4 p.m. on Nov. 14 at Eno Memorial Hall in Simsbury.

The Friends of Town Farms Dairy needs more members and donations. Contact us at FTFD, PO Box 244, Simsbury, CT 06070 or at [www.townfarmdairy.org](http://www.townfarmdairy.org).

And if you go to see the farm, don't forget to visit the calves in the barn.

*Laura Mazza-Dixon lives in Granby. She heads the planning and development committee for FTFD.*

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