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Wednesday 8 June, 2005

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## Top Stories

### Farmers launching new milk business

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June 04, 2005

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**Locals know the Peracchio family farm on Route 44 in Coventry and the Ellis farm on Route 85 in Hebron. Driving by, they see the hand-painted signs, "Perk up your garden with manure." Ten dollars per bucket, Thomas Peracchio said.**

Though the "end product" - manure - is readily available, the milk produced by local cows hasn't been.

That's about to change: In July, six area farmers will launch their own label, The Farmer's Cow.

The six have seen other farmers shut down - especially when the price of milk nose-dived in 2003 - but they won't accept that fate for their own family farms.

At least one, Mapleleaf, existed as early as the 1700s in Hebron and since 1903 at its current site, said owner Edward Ellis.

The co-op the farmers currently belong to sells their milk to Guida and other large bottlers, where it's combined with milk from other farms before pasteurization.

But to survive, the farmers say they need a competitive edge and they think they found it - local identities.

The hope is that more people will buy the milk because they know it's locally made. And each farmer has signed an affidavit promising not to use bovine growth hormones on their cows.

The Farmer's Cow came out of a group that began meeting in 1998 to promote farmland preservation, said Lebanon farmer Robin A. Chesmer.

The group's name, "Very Alive," was a response to pessimism that Connecticut couldn't compete with western ranchers' cheaper land and economies of scale. "You hear about the negative aspects of the future of agriculture here," Chesmer said. "We want to get across that there is a sector alive and thriving, families working, actually expanding our farms."

Very Alive invited legislators to a meal catered with local foods at Ellis'

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Mapleleaf farm in Hebron and on a bus tour of Lebanon and Franklin, to show how, in a 10-mile radius, there are 1,300 agricultural jobs, Chesmer said. The group also promotes the Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program, which has been "vital to maintaining our farms" despite development pressures on land, Chesmer said.

In the program, the state buys from farmers the development rights to their land. The farmers have often use the money to buy more farmland, Chesmer said.

Chesmer, new to farming, said he could not have started his own farm if the previous owner hadn't sold the development rights to the state. Otherwise, developers could have paid more.

Aside from farmland advocacy, the farmers in the group came up with an entrepreneurial idea in 2003 - to package their own milk, Chesmer said.

"You can't go to a supermarket and find Connecticut-produced milk that you know is from local farms," he said. "Where does our milk go? We could never exactly say."

In the old days, when William and Thomas Peracchio's father and grandfather founded Hytone Farm on a hillside in Coventry in 1941, they sent out the milk in steel cans submerged in ice water.

"Now those cans are planters and holding up a mailbox," Thomas Peracchio said.

Since the advent of refrigerated trucking, his 200-cow farm competes with Idaho ranchers with thousands of cows and thousands of acres to grow feed. Here, where land costs several times as much, the Peracchios have to spread out their crops over 350 acres of owned and rented land, in three different towns.

It's not a fair game, but Peracchio's not complaining. He's finding a niche.

While far-away farms can profit from milkfat-based products, like cheese and butter, local farmers will stick to fresh milk.

The Farmer's Cow business structure is not a co-op but a corporation in which each of the six farmers has an equal share, Chesmer said.

With the new label, Peracchio plans to expand by 50 cows over the next two years.

"It's get bigger or get out," he said.

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