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Milk-marketing group is a farmers' delight

Hudson Valley Fresh wins award

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There aren't many young adults like Brian Donovan in the agricultural industry today. The 26-year-old, born and raised in suburban Connecticut, opted for a career in dairy farming.

Now he's managing about 300 cows at Bos Haven Farm in Verbank with the hopes of someday purchasing his own farm.

Donovan's optimism is partly because of the efforts of Hudson Valley Fresh, the nonprofit marketing group that purchases his milk at about \$5 more per hundredweight (11.6 gallons) than the standard price.

That puts more profit in his pockets.

"The best thing about Hudson Valley Fresh is the added income," Donovan said.

Hudson Valley Fresh is owned and operated by farmers. They collect local high-quality farm milk, process and bottle it locally and deliver the products under the Hudson Valley Fresh label.

The group was formed in 2002 at a time when farmers were earning less than what it cost to produce milk.

To recognize five years of contributions to the agriculture community, the Dutchess County Economic Development Corporation awarded Hudson Valley Fresh this year's Agriculture Business Excellence Award.

Award nominator Lee Fraitag described Hudson Valley Fresh President Sam Simon as a man who "sees the bigger picture.

"There's vision, there's selflessness," said Fraitag, of the Willows Bed and Breakfast in Pleasant Valley. "He could see this helping dairy farms in the Hudson Valley, preserving open space and the physical beauty of farms."

What stood out most was, "Sam didn't have to do this," he said.

It's true. Simon grew up on a farm in Middletown. When he turned 53, he retired from a career as an orthopedic surgeon and bought the Plankenhorn family's farm.

"He could have run his dairy farm and just had fun," said Fraitag, who heads the advisory board for Hudson Valley Fresh.

More pasteurization

Simon was inspired by the opportunity to develop a premium milk product with a lower bacteria count and somatic cell count that requires only 20 seconds of the pasteurization process.

"I did this out of passion," Simon said.

He gives most of the credit to those who purchase the milk, such as Bard and Vassar colleges, coffee shops, supermarkets and its newest customer, Whole Foods.

He said as the demand grows, more milk is purchased from the farmers, increasing their profitability. That was what Simon had in mind when he launched the milk label in which all the profit goes back to the farm.

He said the people at Ronnybrook Farm, where Hudson Valley Fresh milk is processed, were the forefathers of the concept.

"We knew we could make a substantial difference in the livelihood of farmers, especially young farmers like Brian," said Simon, of Pleasant Valley.

Fraitag said the group gives back to the community by donating leftover milk to Dutchess Outreach, a family services group in Poughkeepsie. They educate the public about eating healthy foods, too.

Cooperative model

Hudson Valley Fresh has inspired other sectors of agriculture to consider using a farmers' cooperative model to inspire people to "eat local."

Tim Marshall, who rents Bos Haven Farm's dairy operation to Donovan, said the U.S. food system doesn't make any sense.

He said trucking milk to locations hundreds of miles away from the farm is an example of "squandering resources.

"We have to ask, do we want locally grown products? If we do, then we have to have new people like Brian to manage the farm," said Marshall, a board member of Hudson Valley Fresh.

"Donovan is an amazing story. Ten years ago he had no idea how a dairy farm worked," he said. "Look at him today."

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