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Really fresh milk!

By **JOHN VOGEL**

JOHN Conklin, Dave and Peter Coon, Jim Davenport, Jennifer DeForest, Brian Donovan, Vernon Jackson, Bill Kiernan and Sam Simon are incurable optimists — and are still dairy farmers. They own small farms in the Hudson Valley, almost overrun by New York City commuters. Most of their dairying neighbors have cashed out their cows.

Yet, their eight farms are locked in for their next generations. And they expect their cows to be grazing Dutchess County's ruralscape for years to come. Why the optimism?

In 2004, five of them, led by Simon and aided by Cornell Cooperative Extension, created a business plan and formed Hudson Valley Fresh at Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Today, this nonprofit cooperative has eight dairy farms with 800 cows on 5,000 acres — and a \$20-per-cwt. price guarantee for super-high-quality milk.

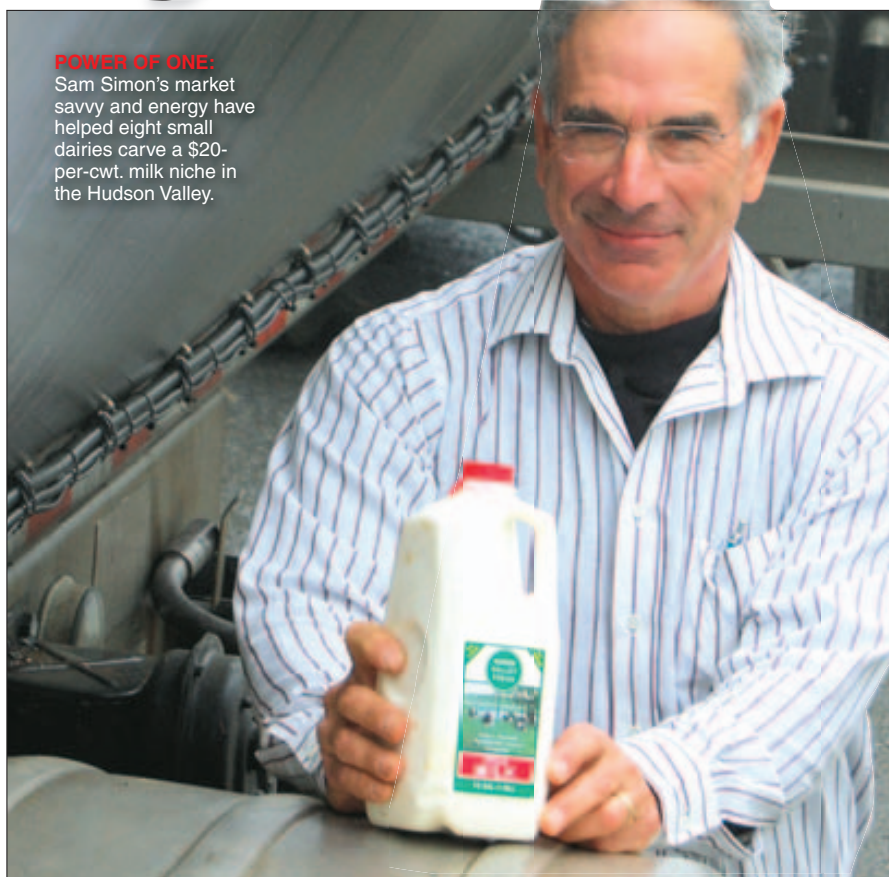
Bottling and marketing fresh, local milk less than 36 hours from the cow, HVF taps an upscale market that wants cows that are kept comfortable and not injected with artificial growth hormones. These milk drinkers also buy into proudly touting Hudson Valley's ag heritage and providing farm families with a living wage.

"During our first week [in 2006], we sold 400 pounds of milk to six families and one store," recalls Simon, who returned to his "dairying roots" after retiring as an orthopedic surgeon. "By this January, we were bottling and shipping 150,000 pounds a month.

"We expect to market 1.5 mil-

POWER OF ONE:

Sam Simon's market savvy and energy have helped eight small dairies carve a \$20-per-cwt. milk niche in the Hudson Valley.



In fact, these producers scoff at the dairy industry's average milk quality. Hudson Valley producers exceed far tougher standards. Their milk's somatic cell count averages under 100,000, with plate counts under 15,000 and bacterial counts of 3,000 or less.

That helps HVF pasteurize at 165 degrees F for only 20 seconds, "and retain more flavor and unchanged natural proteins," Simon explains. "We leave the good stuff in. Our whole milk has 3.9% butterfat plus more fat-soluble vitamin D. It tastes better than most supermarket milk and has a richer flavor."

Hudson Valley Fresh milk is processed and bottled at Boice Brothers Dairy, Kingston, N.Y. Within 36 hours of milking, the whole, skim, low-fat and chocolate milk is on store shelves and in upscale restaurants and coffee shops from Albany to Manhattan.

HVF bottles and ships only what it can sell. Overage is welcomed by Boice Brothers and AgriMark. Milk with low SCC yields more cheese, which benefits AgriMark. It also makes better Adirondack Creamery ice cream, also made at Boice Brothers.

Simon is confident that the next generation of HVF's membership is secure. "We're planting seeds of auxiliary businesses. We have to push the envelope," he insists. "A business that's not innovating and growing is dying."

Check out Hudson Valley Fresh on the Web at www.hudsonvalleyfresh.com. You'll find it refreshingly optimistic.

Key Points

- Hudson Valley Fresh co-op guarantees \$20 milk prices.
- Demand for its high-quality milk is growing each quarter.
- Niche is slowing dairying's exodus from the Hudson Valley.

lion pounds of milk this year," adds the highly energized Simon. "Despite the economy,

Hudson Valley Fresh sales are growing 7% to 10% per quarter." That's why Simon, HVF's president, is either on the run and on his cell phone or tending business at his Plankenhorn Farm in Pleasant Valley.

Until recently, Simon was HVF's sole market developer. "I can put 26 hours into a 24-hour day. Remember, I was an orthopedic surgeon," he jokes. "I love the challenge."

Turning serious, Simon adds, "Milk marketing has been a proven failure for 50 years. Many people are willing to pay more for milk of exceptional quality — particularly when it brings a better quality of life to smaller, local farmers."

Capitalizing on quality

HVF's high-quality milk doesn't have to be "overpasteurized" for good shelf life, he points out.

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