

Dilemma

Is it OK to drink supermarket milk?

Intensive farming means today's dairy herd is prone to disease and abnormalities. Time to drink organic, says **Lucy Siegle**



By and large the happy, healthy dairy cow is the bovine equivalent of the golden goose. For this reason you have my permission to laugh your head off at vegetarians who blithely buy own-brand supermarket milk without a second thought. They are either in denial or have failed to realise that you can barely slip a sliver of processed cheese between the increasingly industrialised dairy and meat industries. Dairy cows almost never get to suckle their calves, used merely as a device to stimulate the cow's milk production. Useless to the £6bn dairy industry, male calves are usually killed for meat within a fortnight.

Daisy, Gertrude, et al – the long-lashed, cows favoured in adverts – have long been dispensed with in favour of the ubiquitous Holstein Friesian, the developed world's bovine of choice. This poor creature will be injected with growth hormones allowing it to produce three calves a year. However, this type of work rate takes its toll; the lifespan of an average dairy cow has decreased from 25 years to five years and up to 20 per cent of the UK dairy herd has a physiological abnormality. Disease such as mastitis is controlled by antibiotics, traces of which can find their way into dairy products.

For every acre farmed in the UK, two more are farmed overseas in order to feed our livestock. More than 30 per cent of European animal feed is made up of soya beans, cassava and soya cake from over 16m acres across the US, Canada and South America, much of which is genetically modified.

All of which is underpinned by a now-famous system of subsidies. These favour

cheap exports, allowing the developed world to dump milk on emerging markets. They also promote anomalies such as the feeding of cheap, subsidised skimmed milk powder to calves by veal producers. In essence, the tax payer helps to pay for calves to be forcibly removed from their mothers and fed a powdered version of the milk they've been denied.

So what happens to this subsidy cash cow? It certainly doesn't go to the dairy farmer. Most British farmers now sell milk at less than it costs to produce. Predictably, the winners are the usual handful of supermarkets and dairy processors.

Mitigate your own dairy dilemmas by buying organic, from as small and traceable a herd as possible and preferably from cattle fed on pasture. Where possible, buy from a milkman. It breaks the stronghold of supermarkets, and glass bottles can be returned refilled up to around 100 times.

You can also question decades of unremittingly dairy-friendly nutritional advice. A number of recent studies suggest that the white stuff may not always be the right stuff, ie liquid goodness in a glass.

For instance, research shows that commanding teenage girls to drink a pint of milk a day to ward off

osteoporosis (as in a recent campaign) is less likely to protect them from the disease than urging them to take more exercise and increase their

vitamin D intake. All of which begs the question, why subsidise and aggressively encourage an industry that promotes high-fat dairy products in an age of spiralling obesity? After all, just as oranges are not the only fruit, cow's milk is not the only source of calcium.★

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▲ Following **Alicia Silverstone** and Christopher Jarecki's organic wedding, ethical nuptials are now de rigueur. Expect a charity gift list and vegan food served by prisoners on a social rehabilitation programme.

▲ Vast palm-oil plantations are threatening the survival of the **Borneo orang-utan** – so a big cheer to Scouse Soaps, the UK's first palm-oil-free soap from www.littlesatsuma.com. Now there's no ecological excuse to be a soap.

▲ Get dressed and campaign at the same time. Just £12 buys you a fairtrade organic **Action Aid** T-shirt and keeps the pressure up on the WTO to investigate trade injustices.



▲ GOING UP ▲

The Green Gauge

▼ GOING DOWN ▼



▼ Queen's Market in Newham is the latest London spot to feel the heat of **pernicious market forces**. This time, it's under threat from a new Asda store. Why does **EastEnders** never have this problem?

▼ How green is your valley? Not very if you live in Val di Susa, near **Turin**, where protesters are fending off developers hell bent on creating a high-speed rail tunnel, 30 miles under the Alps.

▼ The worst drought for 22 years in Kenya is driving **elephants** out of game parks and on to farmland, where they risk being shot. Information about their seasonal movements is urgently required. Join the Earthwatch expedition team: www.earthwatch.org.



Do the right thing Air-freighting flowers from Kenya to the UK last year contributed 30,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions. The biggest-growing UK market is for Colombian roses, flown 5,000 miles. Say it with homegrown, seasonal flowers instead