

Where should you buy a pint of milk to support farmers?



It is a question plenty of people ask: "I want to support British dairy farmers so where should I get my milk from?"

The answer is a complicated one and it reveals some of the deeper problems everyone is grappling with in the dairy industry.

The simplest answer is buy it from the farmer. A local farm shop is also likely to sell you a good product at a price that's fair to farmers.

A traditional milkman could well be a good option, but you'll have to do your research. Many milkmen are supplied by a company called Dairy Crest, our biggest milk processor, which currently pays below what farmers claim is the cost of production. But you can find independent milkmen who pay more to farmers, companies such as Moofresh which delivers across northern Birmingham and beyond.

Supermarket choice

For many though the choice will be to use one of the major supermarket chains and when it comes to milk they're not all the same.

Sainsbury's M&S, Tesco, Co-op and Waitrose all have farmers who supply them directly. About 10% of our dairy farmers are lucky enough to be in this position. They are eyed enviously by many of their farming neighbours. These supermarkets guarantee to pay these farmers the cost of production and a little bit more.

These have been very good contracts for farmers and have allowed them to invest. Supermarkets also impose pretty stringent conditions on everything from the quality of milk to animal welfare. All these supermarkets still sell milk at a competitive and low price. Farmers argue this devalues milk and it certainly has a chilling effect on prices right across the industry. You may not sell your milk to a supermarket, but whoever you do supply has to compete with them.

That pushes your prices lower. So it's a bit disingenuous for these supermarkets to claim they are supporting British dairy farming. They're certainly supporting the 10% that supply them, but they're also causing problems for the rest.

There's another group of supermarkets who approach milk in a different way. Morrisons, Aldi, Asda and Lidl buy their milk from farmers' co-operatives like

Arla and First Milk. These co-ops are all paying lower prices to farmers. The supermarkets argue that's not really their problem. "Mr Heinz doesn't expect me to get involved with the bean farmer" as one executive put it to me.

A dairy farmer has been forced to diversify as the price he's paid for his milk has risen just half a pence per litre over the last 13 years.

Dairy farmer Chris Amos and his wife Heather, who had to think of a new way to sell some of their milk as prices stagnated. He's now calling on supermarkets to rethink how much they sell milk for, saying £1 for four pints is not enough for anyone to make money on the product.

"They're ruling the roost as far as milk prices are concerned. Four pints for a pound is criminal," Mr Amos, of Great Trewen Farm, near Llangrove, said. "We had a letter come from our milk supplier in October (2019) saying they were going to drop the milk price again and it's a case of the figures not adding up.

Protestors have been targeting supermarkets, and it appears to have worked; they've all announced they are increasing the milk price they pay. This higher price goes through the hands of the co-op first. How much of it reaches farmers remains to be seen.

Beyond milk

Meanwhile Morrisons has launched new milk and cheese brands which cost more but all this extra money goes back to dairy farmers.

But of course Morrisons will actually be passing some of that money back to Arla not the farmers directly. Arla is a pan-European farming collective which means the extra cash will actually be divided amongst all their dairy farmers, both here and in the rest of Europe.

It's your choice

The truth is milk is just the start. If you want to support the British dairy industry you'll need to take a close look at the labels on butter, cheese and yogurt.

And in a broader sense think about what it is you are being asked to preserve. A traditional approach to dairy farming. We could be producing milk much more efficiently with thousands of cows inside massive sheds that never go outside. If we keep buying cheap milk that may be what we end up with.

The choices we make in the shops today could have consequences for years to come.