

IN SEARCH OF A RAW (I)DEAL

BY BETSY LEVY

Directions to the pick-up point come through a crackling phone connection. The newcomer pulls into a deserted warehouse parking lot, exits her car, warily looks both ways, and approaches a side door. The woman—let's call her My Friend, and she isn't me—furtively collects a package, and bolts.

What shadowy activity is My Friend mixed up in? Not the return of Prohibition, although a drink is definitely involved. That drink is raw milk, and an estimated 100,000 Americans behave like near-criminals to get their hands on it in the belief that unpasteurized milk has quantifiable health benefits. However, some health authorities charge that it's not safe.

Hence, raw milk is legal to sell in only 28 states, and in several, including Texas, the farmer can't sell it anywhere but on his or her farm. If the milk is sold anywhere else, the farmer risks fines and even criminal charges.

There are two raw milk dairies certified by the Texas Department of Health Services within 30 miles of Austin—Sand Creek Farm and Strykly Texas Cheese. Some customers are willing to make a 90-minute round-trip for a legal milk fix, and others form legal distribution groups so that only one member has to make the trip. But those who, like My Friend, collect raw milk brought to town *by the farmer himself*, are bending the rules.

That's right—raw milk is the new moonshine. Why? Here's what I found out.

The raw-milk debate has raged since the 1920s, when pasteurization first came on the scene. It's one more chapter in the battle of *Natural is Always Better* versus *Better Living through Science*.

The FDA and USDA see raw milk as a public health hazard, which is why milk pasteurization was originally hailed as a huge advancement in food safety. The fact that relatively few people have become ill from drinking raw milk, they argue, is because access has been restricted. More raw-milk consumption could mean more health problems, they say.

The most basic counterargument is that, even if raw milk counts as a health menace, the FDA itself ranks it below hot dogs, ice cream and smoked fish. It is said that many raw milk farmers practice scrupulous sanitation, test for bacteria frequently, and cool milk rapidly—effective ways to lower bacteria counts.

Raw milk is also said to have health benefits that were lost when pasteurization became the norm, but I couldn't substantiate many of them. A 2006 study did associate the occasional glass of raw milk with a 59% reduction of allergy symptoms in a group of British children.

But raw milk dairies tend to use farming methods that do produce quantifiable health benefits. Many use only grass-fed cows, for instance, and grassfed milk has been proven to contain more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) than grain-fed milk. CLA is a known anti-carcinogen. Studies also suggest it promotes the growth of lean tissue over body fat, and enhances bone formation. Raw milk dairies also often prefer Jersey cattle, whose milk is higher in protein, calcium and fat than the ubiquitous black-and-white Holsteins.

I decided that raw milk is neither as bad nor as good as some claim. But enough dry facts. I wanted raw milk, and I decided to play by the rules.

At the Stryk's dairy farm in Schulenberg, Texas, I was greeted by a dozen frisky Jersey cows who decided to accompany me on the walk up the drive. As we approached the farm buildings, they picked up steam, lifting their tails and cutting up a little, udders swaying, then veering away as we got to the Stryk's house.

Bob and Darlene Stryk ended up being even better tour guides than their cattle.

When they took over Bob's father's farm more than 20 years ago, they ran headlong into the truism that plagues modern farming: *get bigger or get out*.

"Bob ran an award-winning dairy," Darlene remembers, "but the thing is, dairy farmers can't set their own price. They come with the truck, they take the milk, and you get a check a month later—you never know how much it's going to be, or if it's going to be enough."

The bottom line improved when the Stryks shifted from mainly conventional milk production to raw milk and raw-milk cheese-making. Darlene gets orders from as far away as Alaska for her traditional Koch Kase (or Czech cooked cheese), and Bob stirs up weekly batches of cheese curds and cottage cheese and butter. I stuffed plenty of each—and a gallon jug of raw milk—into my cooler, and drove back to Austin, convinced I had nothing to fear.

It was time to evaluate the contraband. I sat at my kitchen table with my son—13-year-old taste buds cannot be fooled—and we agreed raw milk was worth the effort. It has a delicate mouth-feel and a discernibly sweet taste. It looks good, too, with a lovely, straw-yellow color—nothing like the stuff I usually buy at the store. The homemade yogurt I made with it stratified into yellow cream and pale milk, which is what happens when milk hasn't been homogenized. In terms of flavor, raw milk made a huge and positive difference. And it's hard to discount the pleasure that comes from having met the cow that gave the milk, and the farmer who milked her.