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Milk Money: Cash, Cows, And The Death Of The American Dairy Farm



Synopsis

There's something un-American and illogical about a market system where the price of a product bears no relation to the cost of its inputs. Yet we have lived with such a scheme in the dairy industry for decades: retail milk prices have stayed the same, while milk prices paid to farmers have plummeted. The dairy business is at the heart of the culture and economy of Vermont, just as it is of many other states. That fact meant little to Kirk Kardashian until he started taking his daughter to daycare at a dairy farm a few miles from his Vermont home—a farm owned by the same family for generations, but whose owners were now struggling to make ends meet. Suddenly, the abstractions of economics and commodities markets were replaced by the flesh and blood of a farm family whom he greeted every day. In the tradition of Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser, Kardashian asks whether it is right that family farmers in America should toil so hard, produce a food so wholesome and so popular, and still lose money. This gripping investigation uncovers the hidden forces behind dairy farm consolidation, and explains why milk—a staple commodity subject to both government oversight and industry collusion—has proven so tricky to stabilize. Meanwhile, every year we continue to lose scores of small dairy farms. With passion, wit, and humor, *Milk Money* shows where we are now, how we got here, and where we might be going.

Book Information

Hardcover: 278 pages

Publisher: New Hampshire (October 9, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1611680271

ISBN-13: 978-1611680270

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.9 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 12 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #190,720 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #19 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Agriculture & Food Policy #122 in Books > Business & Money > Industries > Agriculture #261 in Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Animal Husbandry

Customer Reviews

When Kardashian began taking his daughter to day care at a family-run dairy farm in Vermont, he began to pay closer attention to more than simply the price of milk, cheese, and yogurt. His focus

shifted to price fluctuation, speculation in the commodities market, government agricultural policies, and factory farming. Why is it that each year small dairy farms fail, despite the steady demand for this food staple and government subsidies? Kardashian provides deep historical context, from 12,000 years ago, when farming was on the rise, to the modern science of breeding cows that produce more milk to automated milking machines. He examines a range of issues, from immigrant labor to the roles of genetically modified feed, antibiotics, and artificial growth hormones to, most moving, the tragically negative impact of giant dairy processors on the day-to-day life of family farmers. Kardashian's consciousness-raising journalism aims to boost knowledge about how milk is produced and why thousands of small farmers can't make a decent living and are losing their farms. --Vanessa Bush

"When Kardashian began taking his daughter to daycare at a family-run dairy farm in Vermont, he began to pay closer attention to more than simply the price of milk, cheese, and yogurt. His focus shifted to price fluctuation, speculation in the commodities market, government agricultural policies, and factory farming. Why is it that each year small dairy farms fail, despite the steady demand for this food staple and government subsidies? Kardashian provides deep historical context, from 12,000 years ago, when farming was on the rise, to the modern science of breeding cows that produce more milk to automated milking machines. He examines a range of issues, from immigrant labor to the roles of genetically modified feed, antibiotics, and artificial growth hormones to most moving, the tragically negative impact of giant dairy processors on the day-to-day life of family farmers. Kardashian's consciousness-raising journalism aims to boost knowledge about how milk is produced and why thousands of small farmers can't make a decent living and are losing their farms. "Booklist"[An] excellent book. . . . Kardashian digs into [his investigation] with real depth and intelligence, and Milk Money represents a significant contribution to the burgeoning field of muckraking forays into the food system." Orion "Kardashian's legal expertise provides the book's most stunning insights, particularly when he translates for a lay public the impact of governments' decisions on the dairy industry. In his chapter on dairy workers, for example, he reveals that the North American Free Trade Agreement included provisions forcing Mexico to eliminate its subsidies for small farms (while the U.S. were maintained) and put its communal farming land up for private sale. "Seven Days (Burlington, VT) "The struggle of dairy farms in New England and nationally is not news to anyone, but Kirk Kardashian's book successfully digs into the complexities of why and is an

eye-opener. . . . Kardashian . . . has a good investigative journalist style with clear explanations to unpack the many issues of the dairy crisis and may be a catalyst for saving smaller farms before they're all gone. Milk Money is more than timely and worth a read.

•Providence Journal

“Working geographically, Kardashian provides profiles that are primarily from his current home state of Vermont; he employs the Northeast’s role of cradle to North American dairying as a springboard to track the growth and development of the industry to the upper Midwest and finally to central California Overall, a quite readable, thoughtful and nontechnical perspective on a rapidly fading agricultural icon.”

•Choice"Kirk Kardashian investigates the changing tide of milk production in Vermont and the nation as a whole, finding that the industry no longer backs small, family operations and instead underwrites a system of corporate-owned megafarms in the American southwest."

•Kansas History

“The book vividly illustrates the tremendous upheaval associated with the loss of this unique rural way of life, with poignant stories of the demise of three multigenerational Vermont farms.”

•Vermont History

As the daughter, niece, sister, aunt, wife and mother of California dairymen, I am grateful to Kirk Kardashian for explaining the unexplainable. I have recommended this book to the California Department of Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross, and have purchased and passed the book on to the owner of A.L. Gilbert Feed Company, and to California State Assembly Member Susan Eggman. I recommend Milk Money to anyone even remotely involved with the dairy industry.

I am recent graduate student who studied the milk industry for his master’s thesis, but I did not come across this book until after I had finished. I must say that it has really in depth coverage of many issues surrounding the dairy industry, and I think it paints a fair picture of the pressures and changes that have come about the industry in the last 100 years. Really great.

Although its focus is mainly on the U.S. dairy industry, many of the things analyzed in this book is perfectly valid for other industrial dairy economies, such as that in Mexico. My only disappointment was that the 2009 mergers and acquisitions by the Mexican dairy giant LaLa are not mentioned here. These mergers ended up with LaLa being the second largest dairy complex in the US and the fifth largest in the world, according to a CNN analysis. But the environmental and social consequences of industrial dairy production are well pictured in this book.

Milk marketing is a very complex issue that I don't think most dairy farmers have a real good handle on. I always felt it was deliberately convoluted to keep producers in the dark. This is not always a rosey picture painted in this book, but it is a very real account to the economic pressures felt by dairy farmers.

For the first time in history, an author breaks down the leather curtain and exposes the milk industry for what it truly is. Kardashian's take is honest, introspective, and wide reaching. If you are at all interested in where milk really comes from, read this book.

This is an extensive primer into the history and current state of affairs of today's dairy industry. A well-written and factual presentation of the scope of agri-business and the role it plays in our economy. I'll be recommending this to my family and other dairy farmers in my community.

This was a well research and written book on the milk industry. Easily understand by anyone interested in learning more about the industry and the forces affecting it.

First, I take offense to the subtitle *and the Death of the American Dairy Farm*. Did he mean the *Conventional American Dairy Farm*? Perhaps this gives a clue to his overall take on the dairy industry. Kirk Kardashian was first a lawyer (Vermont Law 2004) and then a freelance writer and now is a senior writer at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth. He got interested in the dairy industry because of his daughter's daycare at a local Vermont dairy. He wanted to understand how the family could work so hard and yet never get ahead financially. Thus, in 2009 he launched into a deep investigation of the dairy industry and published *Milk Money* in 2012. "I wanted to know how the dairy industry had arrived at its current location...I wanted to uncover the implications of that journey...And I wanted to know how we might navigate to a place more just, prosperous, and sustainable" (xv). He is not a dairy farmer, nor evidently had any family in dairying. This is not a limiting factor on his work, it just gives insight that he is looking in and not within. The book is very easy to read and peppered with entertaining descriptions of characters people ranging from dairymen to animal rights activists to migrant workers and veterinarians. It also has simple chapter titles such as *The Workers* and *The Animals* that make it possible to just read a chapter and come back to the book later. The early chapters give an overview of dairy statistics, the evolution of

dairying, and the mutant gene that allows the consumption of milk. The later chapters are focused more on one topic such as "The Environment," with the final one focusing on a particular producer-handler in New York. It almost seems that some chapters were better researched and had greater depth than other chapters, most notably the thin last chapter. The enormous amount of facts, interviews and personal accounts lack true documentation, though Kardashian does offer some footnotes. Kardashian does a good job of pointing out a major problem for dairy farmers: the low price of milk...as set by the confusing Federal Milk Marketing Order. Also how dairy farmers are basically held hostage by the large co-ops that were originally started to help them (read: Dairy Farmers of America, Darigold, etc.). He also explains how the dairy industry is subsidized to create too much milk, and how that continues to lower the milk price. These are standard facts every dairyman knows. Yet, it is a good introduction of these problems to the majority of Americans who just want cheap milk. His investigative information on the dirty deeds of Dean Foods, worker conditions, and animal abuses are about what I expected. It does not surprise me that a large corporation is greedy, nor that workers without rights are treated poorly, nor that animals are abused by bad people. In general the book focuses a lot (with reason) on the Northeast milk market and particularly Vermont. He does delve into generalities of the Midwest and Southeast dairies, and for the West only highlights mega-dairies in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The dairies he focuses on are all either sad stories of families that had to get out of dairying smaller operations (maybe up to 1000 cows) or they are 10,000 + mega-dairies. Except for the final chapter he does not highlight any small, local dairies that are producer handlers or any organic dairies. Thus, his overview of the American dairy industry really is the conventional dairy industry...which, within reason is what most Americans get at the grocery store. I have two major problems with this book: 1) the complete lack of investigation of the small/organic/producer-handler dairy sector, and 2) the apparent lack of a conclusion. In about three pages and seven paragraphs, Kardashian quickly describes and then eviscerates the entire organic milk movement! He even erroneously claims that Organic Valley "ended up being bought by Dean Foods" (218)! This blatant error along with his quick overview of the organic market, and his reliance on the point of view of one non-organic dairyman Sam Simon, patently demonstrates Kardashian's fundamental misunderstanding of both the USDA Organic label as a marketing tool and the separate underlying organic farming methods used to improve pasture and cow. He allows Simon's opinion that organic farms "are a bunch of s*** holes" to serve as the defining judgment of all organic farms. I agree that not all organic farms are run how most consumers may believe they are

run (cows frolicking in pasture), and large corporations have produced a lot of “organic” milk in very marginal ways (Horizon Dairy...i.e. Dean Foods). Yet, to just lop all organic dairies into being “s*** holes” without apparently researching them or visiting them, well, that to me is just poor writing and lazy. My second problem stems from the book just ending after the chapter “Grass-fed, free-range, streamline baby.” I had slogged through this entire book and was looking forward to this final chapter, thinking it would sum up his thesis and give insights to the future of the dairy industry...perhaps highlighting organic, grazing, local and producer-handler dairies that buck against the large co-ops and corporations thus reducing the affect of the Federal Milk Marketing Order, etc. Yet, alas. The final chapter instead, incorrectly lampoons the organic industry as stated above, and then focuses on one large producer-handler in New York that became its own creamery (getting milk from many dairies) called Hudson Valley Fresh. I laughed out loud when I read that the problem for producer handlers was capital outlay of “a minimum of \$2.5 million” (228). Sure for huge processors maybe in the model of mimicking large corporations, but if the real future of American dairy is producer-handlers serving local communities (which I believe it is), then the outlay is much smaller for on-the-farm processing plants on smaller dairies. And then the book just ends...no conclusion, no idea on what Kardashian feels is needed or would help. Just the end of the chapter. He answered the first two parts of his thesis above, but dropped the ball on “And I wanted to know how we might navigate to a place more just, prosperous, and sustainable” (xv). Thus, overall, I don’t find this book delivers what it promises. It is a good overview of standard problems in the dairy industry, but focuses too much on conventional dairy without any investigation into the growing small/local/organic/producer-handler dairy movement. Further, he doesn’t even delve into the growing debate about raw milk and the ability for raw milk sales to be a boon to local dairies since it requires less infrastructure and capital. The broad overview of cow genetics, milk prices, environmental woes, animal cruelty, and worker abuses again is a good refresher for any American that drinks milk, but doesn’t do much for a dairy farmer. I guess Kardashian’s goal was more about highlighting these issues and fostering discussion than actually shinning the light on positive aspects of the dairy industry and growth in the non-conventional sectors. Thus, I’d recommend this book to non-dairymen wanting to get a broad overview of the conventional dairy industry.

Response via email from author 24 May 2013: Thank you for reading my book and taking the time to write a review. I regret the error about Organic Valley. And I don’t think the book presents an indictment of

organic dairies; it just shows that they are not the holy grail of dairy production. I decided not to write much about non-conventional dairies because they represent such a small slice of the industry and I had limited time for writing. In any event, I wish you the best of luck with your new dairy operation. The country needs more people like you, making a high-quality product for a local community.

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