



Michael Ilgert attaches an automatic milking machine at his farm in Renfrew County Ont.

Michael Ilgert is one of only a few small-scale dairy farmers in Canada who still call their cows by name.

His herd of jersey cows produce milk for a group of health-conscious clients.

Although technically illegal because of health concerns, Ilgert harvests, bottles and sells the raw milk as an alternative to conventional pasteurized milk.

Raw milk has been heralded as an all natural alternative to conventionally pasteurized milk, but some experts are concerned about the health risks associated with bacterial contamination.

"Because of the ubiquitous nature of bacteria and other organisms, no matter how good you are at hygiene and various processes, it's virtually impossible to produce milk that is entirely free of potential pathogens," said Mansel Griffiths.

Griffiths is a professor in the food science department at the University of Guelph, and is the director of the Canadian Institute for Food Safety. He formerly held a research chair that was funded by The Dairy Farmers of Ontario.

He was called as an expert witness for the Crown during the trial of Michael Schmidt, a raw milk farmer. Schmidt is a raw milk farmer who recently lost his bid to appeal a raw milk related conviction to the Supreme Court. Although legal in much of Europe and America, the sale of raw milk for human consumption is illegal in Canada.

Schmidt argues that raw milk has built-in immune systems that insure harmful bacteria will not survive in the milk. He said that the pasteurization process actually makes the milk more susceptible to contamination because it removes the natural antibodies already in the milk.

Griffiths touched on the topic saying, "There are some systems that are antimicrobial in milk but you can not rely on those to prevent the growth of pathogens."

Schmidt said that he has done research where he purposefully infected milk with E. coli and found that the level of the pathogen decreased over time which he attributes to the natural antimicrobial effects of the milk.

Griffiths said, "What you're looking at with some of the organisms such as E. coli o157 is not growth, it's survival and the infectious dose of E. coli o157 for susceptible individuals can be as few as 10 cells."

Schmidt's cows are primarily out on pasture or fed hay in the winter. He only feeds them a very limited amount of grain. Because of this, he said his cows only produce about a third of the milk that conventional dairy cattle do.

"When you're in the commercial stream you have a different kind of approach, you want mass production. You're feeding them different. They're not out on pasture anymore. The whole bacterial balance is completely out of whack," said Schmidt.

Griffiths disagreed saying, "The indications are that, in terms of public health, organic milk is no different from conventional milk."

Schmidt talked about the risk of raw milk when compared to other commonly accepted foods. He said that he would be inclined to say you are 100 times more likely to get food poisoning from eating at a fast food restaurant.

Griffiths agreed that some foods such as bean or alfalfa sprouts are actually more dangerous than raw milk but said this doesn't justify making a potentially hazardous food available if there are convenient and easy methods to mitigate the risk.

"My issue is not with consenting adults drinking raw milk. What tends to happen is that parents will impose their beliefs on children and if you look at the demographic of the people who become ill from drinking raw milk, it's not adults, the majority are children."

Schmidt disagreed saying raw milk is safe for children as well as pregnant mothers.

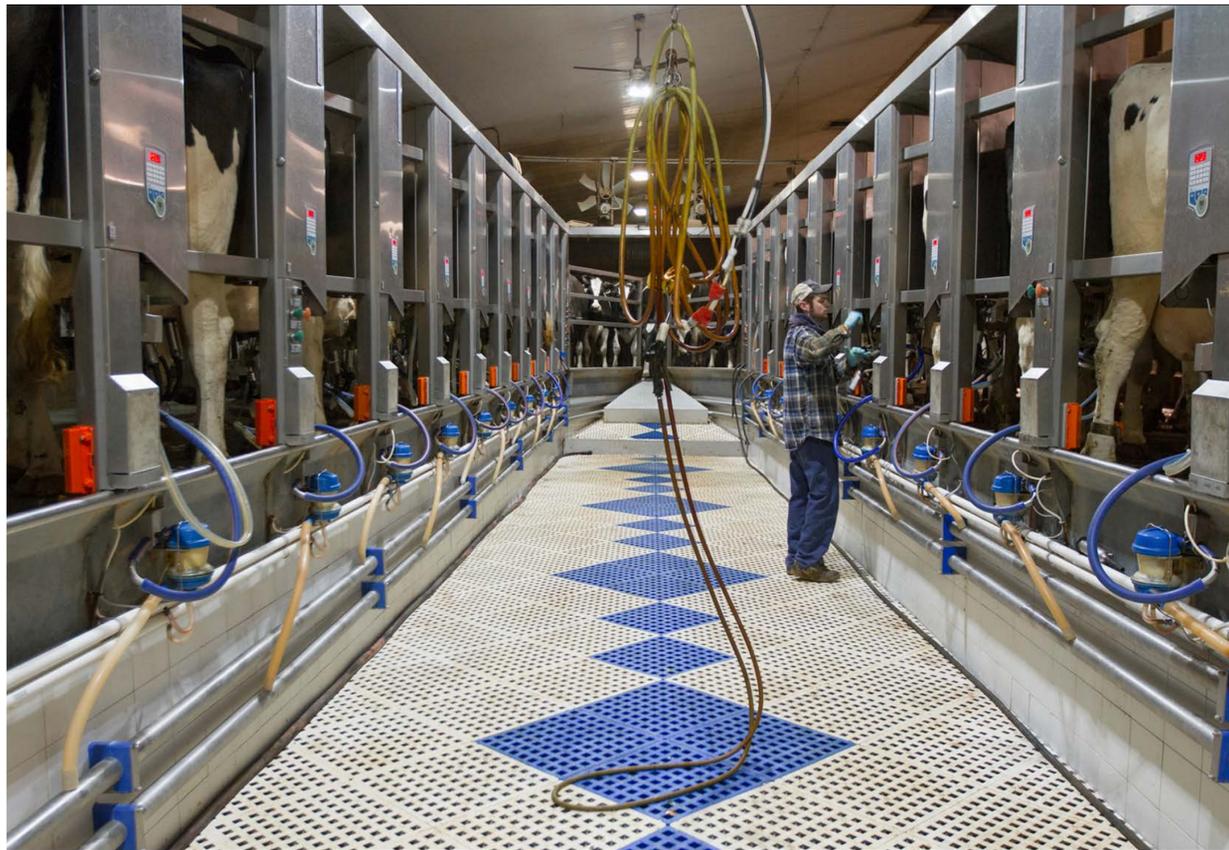
"The whole thing becomes a matter of food rights and I don't care, honestly I don't care, pasteurized or non-pasteurized. Really the issue here is can people make a proper decision in regard to what they think is right for them—in regards to what they put in their mouth."

Photos and story by Micah Bond.
Complete gallery can be viewed at MicahBond.ca/RawMilk



Cows on Ilgert's farm graze before milking time. Ilgert's cows are predominantly grass fed.

The Best Tasting Milk



Phil Rogers operates a milking machine at Donnandale Farms outside Belleville, Ont. Donnandale Farms provides raw milk to Reid's Dairy in Belleville where it is pasteurized according to conventional methods.



Cows wait to be milked at Donnandale Farms.



Ilgert transfers milk from a milking machine to a pail before bottling it.



Ilgert rests his hand on the small milking machine he uses to collect milk.

A machine that works as part of the pasteurization process at Reid's Dairy.



An employee walks between crates of packaged milk at Reid's Dairy.