

## **What can all of us, as breeders who work in the UK dairy industry, do to reverse the trend of consumers choosing cows' milk alternatives?**

As the fight to defeat the negative propaganda towards the food production from livestock continues against the media and vegan organisations, I continue to find myself asking what can we do as producers to reverse the trends of society in choosing cows' milk alternatives?

There has been a rise in vegans amongst Britons from 150,000 in 2014 to 600,000 in 2018. Although the number of vegans is rapidly growing, they are still a small fraction of the current total population. They do however, bring the need for cow's milk alternatives. This shift has helped surge the 70% increase in oat milk, 16% rise in sales of coconut milk and 10% rise in sales of almond milk. Although cow's milk is still without doubt the nations favourite, accounting for 87% of milk sold, however, its popularity is skewed towards older consumers with its peak of 92% among over 45s. On comparison, Emma Clifford's (The Director of food and drink at Mintels) research found that only 73% of 16 to 24 year olds consumed cow's milk, compared to 79% last year. Clifford further stated that the 16 to 24 year old group were the most likely to agree with the statement that dairy farming had a negative impact on the environment.

It is a difficult point to find where it all went wrong. Nevertheless, I believe that farmers have been their own worst enemy. For many years, farmers have not prioritised telling their story or marketed their product properly. In any other industry run by consumer demand, more is done to draw in and capture the consumer. This triggers an argument that farmers need a body to stand up for them, whether it be AHDB or the NFU. Regardless, the bottom line falls on farmers not being proactive enough in marketing their product. In addition, there should be more done to ensure adequate education of the next generation regarding the truth behind food production.

For me, I cannot comprehend that part of the population believe that almond milk is better for the environment than cow's milk. 90% of almonds grown in the world are grown in the drought stricken state of California in America. This requires the state to take water from the water table which has a huge environmental impact, not to mention the air miles in its transportation across the world. It is estimated that 80 billion domestic honeybees have a hand in the Californian almond industry each year, up to half of which die during the management process and the long journeys to and from the large almond orchards. Is this the ethical farming which vegans are craving for?

In comparison to almond milk, cow's milk is produced locally on a farm by grazing or grass based systems. Grazing pastures is a great way to sequester carbon from the atmosphere and store it in the soil. As farming methods move forward and efficiency becomes key, it now takes 90% less land and 65% less water with 63% less carbon footprint to produce 1 litre of milk than in 1944. Moreover, the scientists may have forgotten to mention that the methane cows produce is broken down naturally and re-absorbed by plants and trees to complete a natural cycle. The cows that produce this milk are kept to the highest of welfare standards in the world. After this milk is produced, it is processed at the nearest processing plant and ends in chilled goods aisle the next morning at a supermarket near you. Tell me which one of these stories do you hear in the news or see on a social media post? That's right... neither. I believe one step that must be taken to reconnect the population with cow's milk is to make sure consumers are educated on the full story from both sides of the argument. In addition, the population would benefit from hearing the real facts and figures behind the nutritional value of whole milk from cows. For example, one 200 ml serving of cow's milk, flavoured or not, produces the same amount of; protein as 1 ½ eggs, calcium as 10 cups of raw spinach, riboflavin as 1/3 cup of whole almonds, niacin as 20 cherry tomatoes, phosphorus as 1 cup of canned kidney beans, vitamin B-12 as 100 grams of cooked turkey, pantothenic acid as 2 ½ cups of sweet corn, vitamin D as 75 grams of cooked salmon and vitamin A as ¾ cup of broccoli. These are the messages that we should be shouting from the roof tops.

To promote these topics discussed, I believe we need help. We may rely on the NFU or AHDB, who will communicate these messages to the wider public, however, as dairy enthusiasts can all play our part. Farmers in general need to improve their public image, we need to listen to what the people want and try our hardest to deliver that. We MUST reduce our carbon footprint, reduce our antibiotic usage, continue to improve and maintain our high animal welfare standards, ensure our farms are cleaner, tidier and ready to welcome visitors or inspections at any time. Most importantly, farmers need to become more transparent with consumers. Ask yourself, if you are not willing to open the farm gates to the public on a weekly basis, should you be producing food for them? Many of the points I raise are not as straightforward as black and white, however, this is what the consumer wants and in a consumer run industry they take top priority... well after the cows.

The idea of making a product that people want to buy rather than just marketing milk as a basic commodity, we should be marketing milk as the super food/drink that it truly is. We should ensure promotion of the fact that it is virtually 97% fat free and costs less than water. The dairy industry should also be pressurizing milk buyers to improve their marketing. By advertising a product that is worth more than the current price, by telling the story of the highest animal welfare conditions, and the environmentally friendly way in which the luxurious product is made will make cow's milk more desirable to the consumer. In turn, this would hopefully aid farmers to get paid a fairer price for their product and allow them to improve and progress.

Another opportunity to engage with and educate the public is to hold farm open days and/or school visits. There are several charities across the country that provide opportunities to do this, such as LEAFs open farm Sunday or the Royal Highland Education Trust (RHET). These organisations work with farmers and schools to provide visits for pupils of all age groups to provide insight into where their food comes from and what is involved in production. These exercises are invaluable for educating the younger generation about the truth behind food production and this in turn, removes the blinkers that can be put on by vegan activist groups or negative propaganda in the media.

In conclusion, the way that I believe we as breeders who work in the UK dairy industry can reverse the trends of choosing non cow's milk alternatives is that everyone involved must play their part in the jigsaw. The NFU and AHDB must use their voice and power to promote advertising, particularly within social media and also pressure politicians into making it compulsory in schools to be taught more about farming and the journey their food takes from farm to fork. This coupled with farmers ensuring their story is told in the most positive but truthful manner, and thus the public will be more confident in the product they buy. Transparency is key! I believe that the points raised and solutions addressed, will fuel the reverse in recent trends and increase consumer demand for cow's milk.

Andrew Neilson