Getting Acquainted with Dairy at Great Brook Farm

Before interning with New England Dairy & Food Council, I primarily associated the term “sustainable” with local produce farms, being entirely unfamiliar with the greater farming world – including that of dairy. In May, myself and other curious nutrition students were welcomed onto Great Brook Farm in Carlisle, MA by Marlow Duffy, a 1st generation dairy farmer, to learn what it means to be a sustainable dairy farm in New England.

This farm incorporates a robotic milking machine – the first in Massachusetts – capable of milking roughly 65 cows daily. It is an individualized process, with stored memory of each cow’s udders for proper fit and function. It is also a comfortable process, with the machine essentially massaging the udders and providing sweet grain rewards – something readily accepted by each cow that surely was one reason they were lining up at the gate. A computer system also recognizes when a cow is at risk of over-milking, which can lead to mastitis, and will guide the cow back to the barn. Finally, after milking, the robotic arms will detach and the udders are sanitized with iodine to ensure safe practices.

The milk that accumulates is transferred to a nearby bulk tank where it will remain highly monitored for pH and contaminants until picked up for processing. Marlow stressed that all farmers are very conscious of this, because if one farmer sends contaminated milk, all farmers suffer when an entire tank is dumped. That is hundreds of pounds of milk, hours of labor, and dollars down the drain.

Although the robotic milking machine has lightened the manual labor of milking, Marlow highlighted that it allows them to focus more on cow comfort. While milking, the radio is often playing the latest tunes. While under the cool barn, a large brush spins for any cow in need of a massage and fresh grasses are in abundance for a snack. The feed formulation is very science driven, with a nutritionist monitoring which cows need more of which nutrients, and which grains or grasses will provide these. The cows even wear pedometers around their necks – a bovine FitBit if you will.

As the saying goes, happy cows produce more milk, and Great Brook Farm is ensuring just that.

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