The Milkweed Tests Organic Milk for CLAs & Omega-3s

By Pete Hardin

By mid-June, all dairy cows on “honest” organic dairy farms should be belly-deep in grass – nature’s verdant bounty.

In mid-June, The Milkweed collected retail samples of organic whole milk, from stores located in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Texas. Ten different marketers’ organic raw milk were tested; although some samples were processed in common fluid milk plants.

In late June, the 10 samples were submitted to a world-class laboratory, where analyses of those samples’ milk fat “profiles” were conducted (at a rate of several hundred dollars apiece, we might add). Cows’ milk fat contains at least two dozen distinct “fatty acids.” Key focus in this testing was devoted to two critical fatty acids: Conjugated Linoleic Acids (CLAs) and Omega-3s. CLAs and Omega-3s are widely recognized as key “nutraceuticals” – i.e., beneficial nutrients – contained in cows’ milk fat.

The winner: Cedar Summit Farm, based in New Prague, Minnesota, a producer-handler whose milk cows eat an all-grass diet, year-round.

The loser: a Wal-Mart milk sample processed by Aurora Organic Dairy of Colorado.

(As, for example, are currently recognized as THE leading, cancer-fighting natural substance. CLAs’ role in preventing and fighting cancers was originally established, more than a decade ago, in research headed by Dr. Michael Pariza, chairman of the Food Science Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.)

Importantly, content of CLAs and Omega-3s in cow’s milk correlates directly with access to pasture – i.e., how much quality fresh grass those milk cows’ are eating. Higher CLAs and Omega-3s correlate directly with other food products derived from grass-fed beef, poultry and pork. Several universities are conducting research to seeking to boost CLA content in milk by adjusting cows’ feed intake.

CLAs/Omega-3s: Important measure of organic integrity

Content of CLAs and Omega-3s is a critical measure of the integrity of organic milk, in two ways: compliance with USDA’s rules for pasture access and meeting consumers’ perceived expectations about higher nutritional attributes of organic milk.

ORGANIC RULES SPECIFY DAILY PASTURE ACCESS

USDA rules require that milk cows on dairy farms certified as “organic” must have adequate daily access to pasture. Specifically: milk cows must have access to pasture for a minimum of 120 days per year. USDA’s rules do not detail exactly how much pasture must be consumed on a daily basis. Simply put: higher levels of fresh grass in the dairy herd’s daily diet will register as higher levels of CLAs and Omega-3s in the milk.

The organic dairy sector is currently torn by controversy over USDA’s failure to enforce standards mandating daily access to fresh pasture for milk cows on some so-called “organic” dairy farms. Critics puzzle how “factory” organic dairy farms can physically comply with USDA’s rules for adequate pasture access. It’s physically impossible for dairy cows in mega-dairies to get out to “adequate” pasture on a daily basis. The thousands of cows on “organic” factory farms simply can’t get out to “adequate” grass and return for twice-daily milkings … or so it seems to critics of USDA’s failing organic oversight.

USDA guidelines – issued by the agency’s board that establishes national organic standards – are vague, perhaps intentionally so. USDA’s oversight of organic foods, originally mandated by Congress in the early 1990s, has regularly come down on the side of corporate, factory farms.

The WORST organic milk. Small wonder that this Wal-Mart (“Great Value”) organic milk scored lowest for both CLAs and Omega-3s content in testing conducted by The Milkweed. This milk is from Aurora Organic Dairy in Colorado – a mega-dairy where fresh grass is scarce for the organic standards – and possibly intentional so. USDA’s oversight of organic foods, originally mandated by Congress in the early 1990s, has regularly come down on the side of corporate, factory farms.

Organic products presum ed superior

Many consumers buying organic milk (and other organic foods) presume that the “organic” label guarantees nutritional superiority. These consumers shell out big bucks for organic products, presuming both nutritional superiority and production practices for such foods that comply with USDA’s organic rules, while also avoiding synthetic hormones, genetically-modified crops, pesticides and chemicals, etc. Today’s organic food consumers are a nutritionally savvy bunch.

Organic consumers pay top-shelf prices for dairy foods that they believe contain nutritionally superior benefits – such as CLAs and Omega-3s. They expect the superior flavor of milk from grass-fed herds.

Thus, when and where certain brands of organic milk register “low-end” scores for CLAs and Omega-3s, one can argue that organic consumers are being short-changed, in a nutritional sense.

Statistical limitations of this research!!!

Single samples of products form a very limited basis any claims. Legitimate statistical process would require numerous samples – say, at minimum, a dozen each – to begin to draw any significant differences.

This research funded by The Milkweed is designed to raise more questions than it answers. Results from single samples of different brands must be viewed with reservation. However … when the CLA content of the brand at the top end of CLA-content tests (Cedar Summit Farm – New Prague, Minnesota) is about 6X higher than the low-end (Auro- ra Organic Dairy of Colorado) … legitimate questions start to arise!