

Chapter: Organic Stereotypes

“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

— Aristotle

Stereotypes about organic practices, both negative and positive, abound. While it has been said that prejudice is bias based on experience, many individuals form strong opinions about organic dairying without having ever visited an organic dairy farm. Negative perceptions of organic dairying include: The owners choose to utilize organic methods because they are lazy, cheap, “old hippies”; they are failures at conventional farming methods, so they have nowhere else to turn but to try organic farming as a last resort; organic farms are manure pits, the animals are dirty, unhealthy, and suffer from inadequate or delayed medical treatment. Some positive perceptions include: Organic farms are a utopia; organic products are healthful beyond measure, a fountain of youth, a cure for all ills; we need but to return to “40 acres and a mule” to feed the world sustainably.

I believe that the truth, as with most issues with strongly opposed camps, is somewhere in-between and can be discovered by personal investigation and experience, by “walking a mile in the organic producer’s shoes.”

Unfortunately, matters are complicated by dissension within the organic dairy industry itself. The majority of organic dairy farms tend to be small in size and are directly operated by the immediate family. Large-scale organic dairies may be viewed with distrust and generate claims that they are not genuine organic farms. The USDA definition of “organic” does not stipulate the size of an organic dairy operation. Holistic medicine and management focuses on the needs of the individual dairy animal and its relationship to its environment. Regardless of the size of a farm operation, the cows and their needs remain the same. From my perspective as a dairy veterinarian, the cows on large-scale organic dairy farms are indistinguishable from those of smaller scale farms. As far as the organic cow itself is concerned, size does *not* matter.

There is a saying that farming approached as a business can make for a great lifestyle, but farming for the lifestyle can be a poor business. Conventional dairymen and even otherwise enlightened dairy practitioners tend to believe that organic dairymen farm primarily for the lifestyle. In my 12 years of organic dairy practice, I’ve found the truth to be just the opposite; organic dairymen and women are professionals, business-like and business savvy, concerned with their livestock, soils and environment. They enjoy the lifestyle that organic dairying provides, but also desire and strive for it to be a successful

and sustainable business model. The successful organic dairy will therefore be run as a business, providing a healthful, satisfying lifestyle as a fringe benefit.

From an animal health perspective, there is very little discernable difference between well-run organic and conventional dairies. Both seek to minimize the incidence of animal disease through preventive practices that include proper vaccination, nutrition and management. The best management practices provided in this book will be of value to every dairy producer, whether his operation is organic or not.

The modern organic dairyman is every bit as much a businessman and animal husbandry specialist as his conventional colleague. I feel that conventional dairymen have a lot to learn from and gain by emulating their organic colleagues. Excessive utilization of antibiotics, hormones, parasiticides and insecticides is largely a result of management failure. It is entirely practical and achievable to successfully raise dairy cattle organically, without the crutches of synthetic chemicals. Let's cast aside stereotypes, open our minds and learn how by beginning to take in the "Big Picture" of the organic dairy business.