

# Selling unpasteurised milk

**W**E Irish love milk; we're ranked third highest in the world for its consumption. But we are bringing in legislation to ban Irish farmers from selling milk in its natural state, raw and unpasteurised.

It's two years since Co Kildare farmer Aidan Harney sold his first bottle of unpasteurised cow's milk. As the owner of a 45-strong dairy herd, Harney spent years selling his milk to a major organic processor for little more than cost price. It demotivated him, and things were in the balance. "We were going nowhere, it was either expand, diversify or sell up. We decided to diversify by going into direct sales," he says.

Today, Harney sells 400 litres of raw milk per week. He is one of a handful of Irish dairy farmers who sell raw milk to the public, protected by 2006 EU hygiene legislation which legally permits farmers to sell unpasteurised milk. Harney sells it for €1.90 a litre, and says consumers can't get enough.

"We've seen a huge demand for it from people around here, just huge. The type of people who buy the raw milk are aware of the food they're eating, and they go out of their way to seek fresh, raw food," he says. Why do they buy it raw? "They either drank raw milk when they were younger, or they want to move away from highly-processed foods," he says. "There are also those with dietary issues, like lactose intolerance, who can only drink untreated, raw milk. They're coming looking for it, and everyone is happy."

Harney will soon be breaking the law. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) has drafted legislation to prohibit farmers from selling raw milk from all animal species — including goats, cows and sheep — for direct human consumption. According to a DAFF spokesperson, this legislation is to safeguard public health. The number of people who will be affected by this ban is not known, and DAFF will not make available a list of farmers who sell raw milk in Ireland. The last survey of raw-milk consumption looked at dairy farmers from eight counties, and showed that 84% of them drank raw milk.

DAFF banned the sale of raw milk in 1996, prompted by food safety experts' concerns over pathogens found in it. When EU legislation permitted the sale of it a decade later, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), the State body responsible for Irish food safety legislation, argued vociferously against consumption of raw animal milk. They published information leaflets stating that raw milk can contain potentially fatal pathogens such as *E. coli* 0157:H7, campylobacter, tuberculosis, salmonellosis and brucellosis.

The FSAI strongly recommends pasteurisation, and warns that anyone drinking raw milk places themselves at unnecessary risk of serious illness.

FSAI's chief executive, Professor Alan Reilly, says a ban should be implemented immediately. "Perfectly-healthy animals contain human pathogens. We cannot assure, with the best farming practices available, that faecal contamination of the milk will not happen. The risk posed by it is such that it merits prohibition."

Pasteurisation — heating milk to 71 degrees Celsius for 15 seconds — kills harmful organisms. Advocates for raw milk argue that pasteurisation also destroys essential vitamins and nutrients. Many scientific experts agree that pasteurisation damages some beneficial components in milk. A 2008 Safefood report noted that raw milk is a source of vitamins B (thiamine) and C, but that there are substantial losses of these vitamins during pasteurisation (Safefood is responsible for promoting food safety and nutrition advice to consumers on the island of Ireland).



**Ella McSweeney** of RTÉ's *Ear to the Ground* same time, we are bringing in legislation to



**Pasteurisation — heating milk to 71 degrees Celsius for 15 seconds — kills harmful organisms. But advocates for raw milk argue that pasteurisation also destroys essential vitamins and nutrients.**

## Impending milk ban raises the

DARINA ALLEN thinks we should be confident about Irish milk, a top quality grass-fed product that is exported internationally. She emphatically believes that supporting an independent Irish dairy market would be of benefit to the agri-food sector.

"As a country that exports our milk all over the world, surely we need to be able to say we think it good enough to drink raw ourselves?"

Raw milk sales remain legal in France,

Germany, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden. Would prohibition stop the sale of raw milk in Ireland?

"Banning raw milk will just make it a contraband product, and this is not a good thing for anyone. I am arguing for people to have a choice to make their own decisions. It should be labelled, it can contain pathogens, and needs a warning. But why not let people make their own choice?"

Consultant bacteriologist Professor Martin Cormican of NUI Galway understands this view, but he is adamant that a ban is best for society at large.

"It is a difficult issue balancing risk and balancing rights," he says. "I understand this point of view, but you could make the same libertarian argument in favour of allowing people to let their children travel without wearing a seat belt. In a society where we all share responsibility for looking after those who suffer acci-

Darina Allen, of Ballymaloe Cookery School, has long advocated the health benefits of drinking un-pasteurised milk. "There is much research to show that drinking raw milk helps the immune system, and is preventative against the likes of asthma and eczema," she says. Her sentiments are echoed by the Weston A Price Foundation, a US non-profit lobby group. They claim that pasteurisation greatly reduces the effectiveness of immune-enhancing elements present in raw milk. Recent, peer-reviewed scientific studies support the claim that raw milk enhances the immune system.

**B**UT some scientists say the risks are too great. They point to the recent *E. coli* outbreak in Germany (the source was vegetable sprouts) to illustrate the fatal dangers from eating food infected with *E. coli*. Others point to the discovery of a new strain of the drug-resistant

MRSA superbug in cow's milk, and in people in Britain and Denmark.

Professor Martin Cormican, a consultant bacteriologist at NUI Galway, is vehement about the dangers from drinking unpasteurised milk. "I have no doubt that drinking raw milk represents an easily avoidable risk of infection," he says.

Despite huge improvements in herd health since the 1950s in Ireland, Professor Cormican says that raw milk from Irish dairy farms can be pathogenic. "Healthy herds of cows may have in their faeces bacteria that are dangerous for us. You cannot get milk out of a cow without getting faeces. Raw milk contains *E. coli*, and drinking raw milk means drinking diluted cow faeces, with all the associated risks," he says. He drank raw milk as a child. "I remember my father squirting it from the cow's teat into a cup and giving it to me. I would not have dreamt of giving it to my kids when they were small. I'm not a

hygiene nut, but I wouldn't have given the kids raw milk for love nor money. The risk is unacceptable, and it outweighs any evidence of health benefits from drinking unpasteurised milk," he says.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods has refused to release detailed information about the proposed ban. A Freedom of Information request on the new legislation was refused.

However, it is clear that DAFF and FSAI staff have been working on legislation for more than four years. Numerous internal emails between their staff members on proposals to ban the sale of raw milk were exchanged from May, 2007 onwards. What is surprising is that DAFF decided not to undertake a public consultation on the proposed ban.

They did, however, undertake a public consultation in 2008 on inclusion of goat and sheep milk in the proposed legislation. A