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ON&OFF FARM



David Tiernan, with some of the rounds of his awards winning Glebe Brethan cheese. David and Mairead Tiernan are licensed to produce their raw milk cheese and they have started selling raw milk to consumers to add further value to their milk.

CASE STUDY

Regulation the best solution

David and Mairead Tiernan started selling raw milk in November 2010. They had invested in a cheese-making facility on their farm in Dunleer, Co Louth where they have been successfully producing their award-winning unpasteurised cheese, Glebe Brethan.

"We set up the business to produce small quantities of high quality cheese. We didn't want to be selling cheese out by the forkload," said David.

Milking 65 cows, they have grown the raw cheese part of their business and they now sell five tonnes of cheese each year. "We still supply Glanbia with the majority of our milk and they have been very encouraging and helpful," said David.

They saw an opportunity in selling raw milk to utilise their existing facilities. As one of the 18 farmers registered to make raw milk cheese, David has to undergo increased testing which he is happy to comply with.

"Before I started selling raw milk, I talked with the Department of Agriculture and was inspected again and numerous samples were taken. In the end, the Department said 'we don't want you to do it but we can't stop you'," said David.

The milk is bottled two days a week. They first started selling it in Sheridans in Carnaross and that's still where the majority is sold but there is growing interest from retailers.

"I am selling 300 to 400 litres a week and, to be

honest, I haven't really been pushing it," said David.

People are starting to arrive at the farm to buy raw milk. David sells the milk from the farm for €1.20 but delivers into retailers for less onto which they add the margin they require. "There is a growing awareness for the taste and there are growing health benefits that are now coming out," said David. "We have a really terrific product in raw milk and, if we approach it right, we could have a system that is totally traceable," he added.



"Selling raw milk for direct consumption should not be a free for all. It should be regulated," believes David Tiernan.

David, as expected, is against an all-out ban on the sale of raw milk but he does not believe there should be a 'free for all' system either.

"It has to be regulated like the production of raw milk cheese and this is the route the Department should take. There is potential to have two to three farmers in every county licensed to supply a growing level of demand for raw milk. That way, the Department could properly regulate milk produced from a food grade premises with a good level of hygiene.

Selling raw milk a bu

A small number of farmers with Department approved facilities are now bottling milk and selling it raw. For them, it is a very real and viable business model, servicing what they see as a demand from a small but informed consumer who knows the risks, as well as the benefits, when they purchase milk directly from them.

Farm families have been drinking milk straight out of the bulk tank for generations. The most recent survey of raw milk consumption among dairy farmers found that 84% of them drank their milk raw or unpasteurised. Even the farmers who drink it know that it is not without risk.

As well as huge nutritional bonuses, milk can contain low levels of pathogens. The risk of TB and brucellosis has greatly reduced but there are agents, such as E.coli, that can cause infections to humans.

Pasteurisation, the process of heating the milk, was effectively brought in to kill the majority of these pathogens to make milk safer. However, emerging evidence indicates that raw milk is seen differently by the human immune system, and may contain components that protect against allergy and asthma development. This has led to a renewed interest in consumers looking to buy raw milk.

Sale of raw milk should not be allowed – FSAI CEO

THE clear advice from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) is that, on public health grounds, the sale of raw milk should not be allowed for direct consumption, according to Alan Reilly, chief executive of the FSAI. "As an independent consumer protection agency, it is our remit to give advice to Ministers and their Departments that is backed up by sound scientific data," he said.

"Under common conditions, with the best hygiene you will end up with low levels of pathogens that can be harmful to humans," said Alan. He pointed to a recent two-year study carried out in conjunction with Cork County Council in testing raw milk. The study found a low level of pathogens in many samples. He also referenced numerous outbreaks in

Have YOUR say

Should the sale of raw milk for direct consumption by the general public be banned in Ireland?

• Text FJ followed by YES to 51444 (86122 in Northern Ireland) if you think it should be banned.

• Text FJ followed by NO to 51444 (86122 in Northern Ireland) if you think it should not be banned.

Service provider: ZAMANO. Standard text charges apply.



The sale of raw milk for direct human consumption was actually banned in 1996 under hygiene legislation. However, a newer EU directive brought out in 2007 allowed the sale of raw milk once again but it made a provision for individual member states to ban it. That is what the Irish Government looks set to do.

Draft legislations being prepared by the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture, if implemented, will make selling raw milk directly to the public illegal.

the US linked to the sale of raw milk and raw cheese.

He is aware of the benefits that many claim raw milk has over unpasteurised milk.

"We have looked at the scientific evidence and many are observational studies that carry no weight. There are reports that some vitamins may be decreased with pasteurisation but this is not a major problem in Ireland," he said.

His attitude is that if pasteurisation takes away from the goodness of milk, the focus should be on looking at ways to reintroduce them after pasteurisation.

Catherine Stanton, of the Teagasc Moorepark food research department, is currently involved in a Moorepark study comparing raw and pasteurised milk. She said that there is emerging evidence indicating that raw milk is seen differently by the human immune system, and may contain protective components that protect against allergy and asthma

development when consumed in the first year of life

She said that further work is required to identify the protective milk components, and to develop new technologies in the dairy industry to protect these fragile components during milk processing

However Catherine said that a key food safety issue regarding raw milk is that it may contain low numbers of pathogenic bacteria. "Although most healthy people will recover from raw milk related illness within a short period, individuals with weakened immune systems such as children, pregnant women, the elderly and those suffering from chronic debilitating illnesses are particularly at risk, and are more susceptible to severe or life-threatening infections."

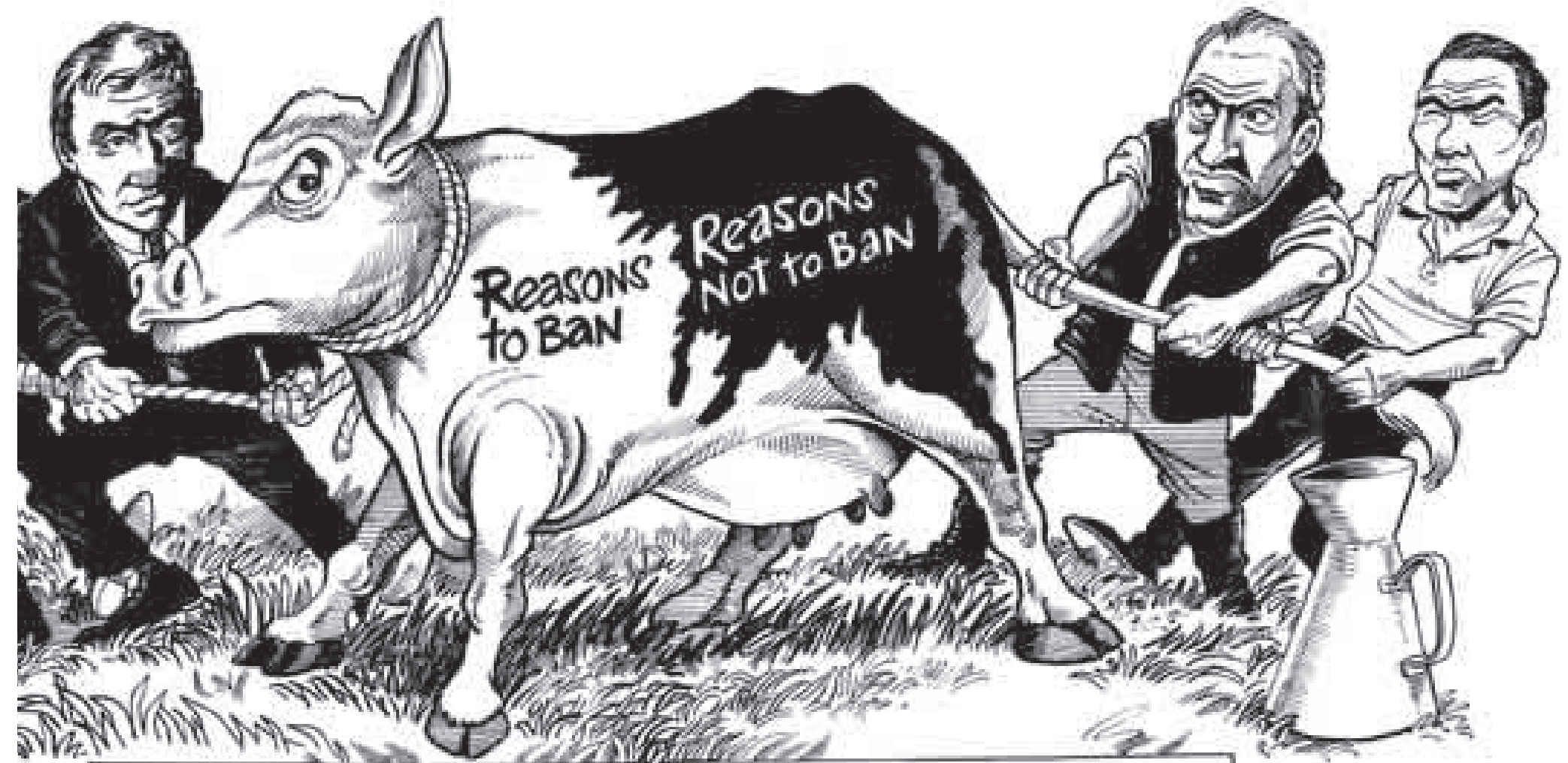
She feels that the most effective way to protect public health is to ensure that raw milk intended for direct human consumption is pasteurised.



PETER YOUNG



Business opportunity or deadly weapon?



REASONS TO BAN

- Definite risks from E.coli, campylobacter and other diseases
- Hard to monitor on ongoing basis
- Threat to Irish image abroad if outbreak occurs
- Research funding from large companies into raw milk not forthcoming

REASONS NOT TO BAN

- Growing evidence of health benefits destroyed by pasteurisation
- Demand growing from customer
- Free choice – give informed consumer choice
- Business opportunity for dairy farmers
- Risks much lower than in past
- Force sale of raw milk underground

Debate comes down to weighing up the risks involved

While there are issues of freedom of choice for consumers, the debate comes down to weighing up the risks. On one side, there are definite well documented risks associated with pathogens that can occur in milk at small levels, even with the best hygiene practices.

There is also growing evidence indicating that raw milk may contain protective components against allergies and asthma development — a growing problem in the current population.

PROBLEMS

One of the problems has been that research into raw milk has not been carried out by large companies.

Pasteurisation suits the large volume production needed for commodity production. At a recent interna-



Alan Reilly, FSAI CEO.

tional conference of raw milk in Prague, the growing research on the health benefits of raw milk were brought together.

There is obviously an op-

portunity for a small, well regulated number of farmers to be licenced to sell to a growing niche market. The farmer would certainly be happy to comply with reason-

able additional tests. After all, it is definitely not in their interest to risk a disease outbreak with their customers.

Maybe it is also worth thinking of the consequences that banning raw milk would bring. Of course, it would stop some consumers buying but those who still want it will find a way. It could create a black market for raw milk that would be impossible to regulate and increase the risk to the consumer who wants to buy it.

Innovative ways will also appear. In Canada and some US states where selling raw milk is banned, cow share clubs were formed. The consumers bought the cow and paid the farmer to mind and milk their cow and give them the milk, which is legally their milk.

FSAI policy is clear. Point-

ing to a list of recorded outbreaks for disease based on raw milk, Alan Reilly said the latest one — a campylobacter outbreak — originated from one of these cows share schemes. Yet, looking at the USDA figures, 800 people have got sick from raw milk since 1998.

I would like to see this compared with other foods produced, where there is a potential risk to public health; and regulations, rather than bans imposed to reduce the risk. Examples of these foods are shellfish and eggs. Bord Bia, Fáilte Ireland and other bodies have been comfortable in promoting Irish raw milk cheeses abroad for more than a decade and the risks are there as well.

The FSAI advises the Department of Health and Agriculture on the issue. These Departments are the ones

who will have the final say. They are the ones who now have to take a commonsense approach to the whole issue. The fact is that any ban cannot control the domestic farm consumption.

A major emphasis has to be driven home that safe and hygienic standards are needed on every farm, from which the household drinks the milk. The debate is not about anyone and everyone selling an unlicensed, unquantifiable product to an uninformed public. Producers who are registered, but willing to adhere to proven rules and regulations, should be allowed sell raw milk. Part of this is to inform their customers of the risks.

For me, the best route would be to regulate as trying to ban it could cause many more problems.

— PETER YOUNG