



Huron Farms To Tables

St. Brigid's butter in high demand from top chefs



How now, brown cow

St. Brigid's Creamery is famed for its rich, yellow butter made from the milk of Jersey cows at Bill van Nes' family farm near Brussels. (Scott Stephenson photo)

By Scott Stephenson
The Citizen

While searching for stories for this section, *The Citizen* stumbled across an article from a Toronto-based blog that was extolling the virtues of the butter produced by St. Brigid's Creamery.

Over the past few years, St. Brigid's has quickly become one of the worst-kept secrets among top chefs working in kitchens across the country. The butter is known for its bright yellow colour, rich flavour and superlative texture. It also happens to be made from the milk of the herd of Jersey cows on Bill and Cindy van Nes' family

farm, just outside of Brussels.

The Citizen set up an on-farm interview with Bill and made the short trek over to Brussels on a sunny day in July for a quick chat about what makes his butter just a little bit better than all the other butter out there. Almost four hours later, we returned to the office with all the answers we sought, some butter to sample, and a whole new perspective on one of modern society's most misunderstood heroes - the cow. This is the story of St. Brigid's Creamery.

On this particular afternoon, the pastures on either side of the long driveway up to the van Nes house had cows grazing in them. At the end of that long driveway was the

man that *The Citizen* was there to see, Bill van Nes - the farmer who dreams of butter.

Van Nes named his butter business after St. Brigid - the patron saint of dairy workers. As he tells it, this compatriot of St. Patrick was a pretty inspiring lady. "There's lots of legends about her giving away butter and making beer, and other fun stuff," he said. "She knew how to have a good time, and she knew how to give to the needy."

While Bill talked butter, his wife, Cindy van Nes, was nearby, tending the family's vegetable garden. Cindy also does the accounting for their business. Bill appreciates Cindy's bookkeeping abilities, but tries to avoid the fresh vegetables she grows whenever possible. "I'd say I'm 98 per cent a carnivore," he offered. "And I don't eat a lot of bread. If you were to ask me how I best enjoy our butter - it's on steak, from our own Jersey cows. Jerseys have very fine-grain meat, and it marbles really well. It's awesome." In Bill's estimation, the best steaks come from a fattened-up, retired cow from their own herd. "It's just more tasty than something younger," he explained. "People don't like to take the effort to keep them that long, but that's what I eat - a fat, stale cow that's older. That's the best."

Bill's current farm isn't his first rodeo - it's not even the first farm he's worked on Brandon Road - not

even close. "This is the fifth house I've lived in on the same road in my
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been subtly shifting - Local Rolla's customers aren't stopping by the truck because they're already down at the beach, they're down at the beach just to stop by the truck. Jenn thinks their generous portion sizes have something to do with that. "People are bringing their families here for dinner," she said. Customers can either take their meals to go, or sit at one of the picnic tables set up near the truck for a unique al fresco dining experience near Lake Huron.

It's Pat and Jenn's eventual goal to feed as many members of the community as they can. They already have a "Pay It Forward"

system in place, where diners can choose to purchase a meal for somebody in need. In the past, they've both experienced real hunger and homelessness - issues that are on the rise all over Canada. "Fifteen years ago, I was eating out of garbage cans," Pat explained. "Now that we're in a healthier place, we want to make sure that the community gets a little bit of that back. There were times when I was so hungry, or just wanted a cup of coffee, and there were generous people out there that helped me on my journey. And that's the whole idea behind this truck - we wanted to do something different, and we wanted to give back to the locals."

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Van Nes cares for herd of 350 Jersey cows



Cowabunga!

These docile and curious cows are known for their high butterfat content, which results in a high-quality butter.
(Scott Stephenson photo)

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I've lived in on the same road in my life. I've only lived on this road, my whole life." He grew up on a traditional dairy farm just outside of Ethel. His brother became interested in organic farming, and Bill followed suit. After his brother passed away, Bill went all-in on organic farming and a herd of Jersey cows. "When we were young, we used to have cows outside, and the 'dry' cows in pasture. Cows on grass is just a pleasure. It's a lovely sight - it appeals to the senses. Then, when we went to confinement, the cows never went outside, and I missed it. I wanted to get the cows outside again. And then organic became a part of that. At the time, we were reducing pesticides, and trying to find alternative cropping methods."

The Jersey cow is definitely Bill's animal - he has nothing but good things to say about them. "Jerseys are definitely special," he stated. "They're docile, curious creatures. They can be emotional - they have more character. They're a totally different temperament than Holsteins. They're smaller, they're easier to handle. They're also really suited for grazing." Bill also explained that, for their size, Jerseys have large muzzles, and their multi-stage stomachs can handle grass better than their black-and-white counterparts. Jersey cows are also lighter on their feet, which helps farmers maintain their pastures. "A Jersey cow hasn't been bred to eat out of a feed manger. They're different. They're also much more heat-tolerant, and cold-tolerant... They're also more efficient, and they have a higher butterfat. And their butterfat is totally different from Holsteins. It's very heavy, with much bigger fat globules, which rise to the top very quickly. It churns very easily for butter... Jerseys have really pretty faces."

At this point, to gain a deeper understanding of what sets St. Brigid's butter apart, first one must understand a little bit about Canada's commercial dairy industry, and the national supply management system that has, well, managed our dairy supply since the 1970s. In the commercial dairy

has since, slowly, grown to about 350 head. It's still not enough to keep up with the demand, though. In order to produce the quantity of milk he needs to make butter, Bill has obtained an exemption from the Dairy Farmers of Ontario's quota system, which has strict rules about the amount of milk any one farm can produce. And it's still not enough to keep up with demand. "We didn't expect this," Bill admitted. "Now we have to raise our price, but we don't want to raise it too much, because that's not the idea! We want to expand the market!"

Years ago, before he decided to just focus on salted and unsalted butter, he also tried his hand at producing cheese. "I couldn't really get any traction on the cheese. It was quite a big investment to do storage, and you can't just make a little bit and keep going like you can with butter. It was delicious, though." Seven years later, he still has some of that original cheddar in storage, and, in his opinion, it keeps on getting better with age. About five years ago, Bill teamed up with a butter producer who used milk from his cows and two other Jersey farms to make grass-fed, organic butter. That company later went bankrupt, so Bill decided to strike out on his own. After a few false starts, St. Brigid's Creamery was born.

There are hundreds of places to buy St. Brigid's butter in Canada, including every Whole Foods in Ontario and some in B.C. In nearby Stratford, Bill's butter can be found at The Little Green Grocer, The Gentle Rain, and the Wild Hog Country Market. "We haven't made that many in-roads in Huron County." One of the places in

Huron County that does carry St. Brigid's is Meeting Place Organic Farm near St. Helens. Bill knows the price tag on his butter is one of the reasons it hasn't caught on locally. Depending on where you buy it and how much you buy at a time, a 250-gram stick of St. Brigid's will run you somewhere between \$10 and \$14. They also sell cases of frozen butter direct to homes in Huron County and the surrounding area. A shoebox-sized case of 25 sticks of butter may cost almost \$250, but, for Bill's butter fans, it's just worth it. "This butter behaves very differently," Bill pointed out. "If you put it in a cast iron pan, and just watch it melt, you will see a difference. It's churned in the European style, and it's more spreadable, even right out of the fridge. Lots of people from Europe and South America comment that it tastes more like the butter they get at home. Here in Huron County, it's the price point for sure," he said. "They just don't see the value in it, yet. But tasting is believing. If you want to get the most out of this butter on a slice of bread, you should see your teeth marks - don't spread lightly."

A tour of the whole operation at St. Brigid's really casts the price of Bill's butter in a whole new light. It's not that he prices each stick based solely on its superlative quality - it also takes a tremendous amount of time, effort, and cash to make butter this good. "If it was a money-maker, everybody would be doing it," Bill explained. "If cows live in the barn, they're much easier to manage. If we're working outside, with the elements, we do take a production loss. But the milk is superior. We try to keep our cows outside as much as possible."

Everything at St. Brigid's comes back to the proper treatment of the cows, throughout their entire life cycle. Bill's oldest milk producers are around nine and 10 years old. When it's time for one of his Jerseys to retire, he tries to find her a new home to live out the rest of her days. "We sell a lot of 'house cows' to people in the Mennonite community and people who want cows to just have milk at home. We don't bring them to the sales if we can help it. We've got a waiting list

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Sprawling farm operation offers many benefits



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I've sent cows to Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. People just keep wanting these cows."

The "full tour" involves so much more than just a stop at the pastures on either side of the driveway and a visit to the milking parlour. Each group of cows moves to a different part of the pasture once or twice a day. On this particular day, the cows wouldn't normally have been outside in mid-afternoon, but a recent bout of rain had just shaken up their schedule. "We don't normally have them out at this time of day, at this time of year. In June, they're outside all the time, but it was getting hotter and drier, so we've been keeping them in during the day."

Spending the hottest part of their days indoors doesn't mean their diet changes much - when the cows can't go to the pasture, Bill and the workers at St. Brigid's bring the pasture to the cows. "We do cut and carry - we go out and cut fresh forage, and we go feed them in the barn. It's very good for the cows - it's very high in energy. And it's also very good for the milk, and it's very good for the butter. It keeps it nice and yellow. It's also more work because you have to go out and do it every day."

The ungulates with a direct line into the main barn are, of course, the current cow crew providing milk for butter-making. The milking parlour and barn are just a short trip up the hill. Mixed into their herd are a number of Bill's bulls. They're easy to pick out of the crowd - the bulls are darker, and they tend to draw attention to themselves with a lot of bellowing. They're also more muscular, and tend to hang out near the outskirts of the herd, making noise and looking cool.

It's a popular opinion that Jersey bulls can be quite mean, but Bill begs to differ - it's all in how one treats these handsome gentlemen. "The bulls are awesome! Our bulls are raised on mums. That's why we can walk in here, and not worry about the bulls. If the bulls are raised on a bottle, then we become their peers, and that's when the problem comes. That's how people

get hurt. We leave our bulls alone, we handle our bulls as little as possible - the cows are their peers, us humans are not. And a lot of people don't know that. They say Jersey bulls are the worst, but that's just how they were raised. Freedom to express their natural behaviour - that's one of the five freedoms of being a cow."

Bill's not just thinking about bull mental health; having a few eligible bachelors around is good for everybody. "A bull in the herd helps the herd dynamic, 100 per cent. Working with it, we see it. And it's much better for the bull. We grew up with bulls too, but they were in a pen by themselves. And then we brought the cow in heat to the bull. And those bulls were nasty. You did not want to get stuck in a bullpen."

While the bulls mostly hang around with each other and the cows, the cows are deeply invested in what humans are getting up to. They don't just follow Bill wherever he goes - they follow everybody. The Jerseys are curious about new people, camera lenses, loose shoelaces, a grasshopper clinging to a haystalk - pretty much everything. "They're very chill," Bill pointed out. He also pointed out an example of the fertility cycle at work. "Look at those dung beetles at work - they're just amazing!"

A short trip down the road leads to another field, seemingly empty, surrounded by woods on all sides. As Bill's truck drew near, Jerseys started pouring out of the forest. They were indeed light on their feet - from a distance, they looked to all the world like a family of deer. When the truck stopped, it was quickly surrounded by cows, who smelled the tires, eyed their own reflections in the mirrors, and pressed their snouts against the windows. These are the far-off dry cows. Giving cows time to "dry-off" between calvings allows them to recover from the experience, and promotes healthy udders, mothers and herds. "Three weeks to a month before calving, we bring them back to the barn to prepare. But they're outside in this group for a month, or a month and a half."

Being greeted by a gaggle of charming cows is most enjoyable. "They just came out of the bush to see us. Cows are from the woods. They evolved in the woods. They started acting as herd animals, and with compaction, with the herd effect, that's how grasslands started becoming a thing. The compaction, the effect of hooves on the grass - that's what makes grass grow. You get your carbon from grass that gets broken off, mixed with urine and manure, and it all becomes part of the soil. If grass oxidizes without being incorporated into the ground, there goes CO₂. But if it's incorporated, that's how you build topsoil. We have to give the cow credit where credit is due." All Bill's cows get to spend time

enjoying the wooded part of his farm. "When they go through the woods, they're just so natural. I think especially for a Jersey cow more than a Holstein - they're much surer-footed. They know what they're doing. So we rotate them through the bush here."

Surrounded by a rapt circle of his dry Jersey cows, Bill went on to explain how herds of bison and buffalo, pursued by predators, had formed the Great Plains in North America, and how important cattle were to the Maasai people of Africa. The Maasai are a pastoral Indigenous society that tend to their herds in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. Their cattle-keeping methods are a central part of their cultural identity - traditionally, the Maasai have eaten cows, drank their milk, worn their hides, made tools from their bones, taken salt from their blood, and governed themselves in accordance with what their herds need.

The next stop was a wide open pasture full of rolling hills and long grass. Bill demonstrated how the borders created by long, thin lines of electric fence are designed to be reconfigured with ease, using rolling electric fence posts called tumble wheels. This keeps all the cows on the move from one section of the grazing land to the next, and allows previously grazed land to regenerate undisturbed. As Bill moved the fencing, the heifers in this pasture made the long trip up and down the hilly field, just to see what was going on. After they checked everybody out thoroughly, the young cows set about continuing their lunch. "I love listening to them eat. And I love the smell of cows outside."

The next stop on the tour was a visit to the fall and spring calves. "We breed everything back to Jerseys. We don't use AI, we don't use beef bulls. We tried it once and I hated it!" Bill loves the cyclical nature of his sustainable Jersey cow farm - it's inspired by many other farmers from all over the world that came before him. "Cows have been the centre of a lot of cultures,

historically. Like the centre. The cow is sacred. If handled properly, they have so much to contribute. They're volume-eaters, and they're volume-fertilizers. They turn the soil into living stuff you can grow crops with... the cows make it regenerate." The calves in these fields need to be acclimated to life in the pastures before they can join the rest of the group. "We'd like to start raising our calves on mums," Bill explained, "but we're not there yet. But that is a goal of mine. When we get there, that'll be another story."

The final stop on the tour brought us back to where it all began - the pastures on either side of the long driveway at the main farm. This time, it was to visit a small group of cows waiting to calf. Most of these expectant mothers like to spend their time grazing and relaxing while they await the big day. We also visited a manger that was

temporarily housing two young calves, both born only a few weeks ago, out of step with the fall and spring calves. Bill was happy that they had each other to play with - well-adjusted animals require socialization. "One of my favourite paintings," he said, "I forget the artist, but it's of the nativity, and you know what's front and centre? A cow. We have to give the cow its rightful place."

Bill van Nes doesn't run an organic dairy farm because it's easy - he runs it because he likes good butter, and because he loves his cows. "If I wasn't an optimist, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. I have to be an optimist. But I have to be a realist. And sometimes I don't pay attention to what's real... This is not an easy road. But I'm optimistic that it'll work out.... I'm thought of as being eccentric, and kind of out there. And I'm OK with that."

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