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From Family Farm to Corporate Mainstay:  
A Social History of Organic Dairy Production in the United States

Abstract:

*For the last five decades, small-scale dairy farmers have been transitioning to organic practices across milk producing regions in the United States. Long before a market for organic dairy products even existed, farmers made individual decisions to abandon pesticides and herbicides on their feed and antibiotics on their herds, even at a time when there were no financial rewards for doing so.*

*Today, organic milk, yogurt and cheese are produced by large multinational corporations and can be found in any supermarket. However, the movement originally started on family farms as a farmer-led reaction against the chemical inputs encouraged by conventional production.*

*This article explores the emergence of organic dairy production in the United States, with an emphasis on the state of Vermont. Using first-hand accounts and unstructured interviews with pioneering farmers who transitioned as early as the 1960s, I outline the different periods in the evolution of organic milk and dairy from a small-scale experiment to a corporate mainstay. By documenting the shifting motivations of producers and the challenges they faced, I establish the main factors that drove this new industry and contextualize the transition to organic production from a historical point of view. I will show how a producer-led effort to produce organically was eventually overtaken by market forces, and what this says about the process in which organic food becomes mainstream.*