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## Traditional European Dairy Foods From NYS Farmstead Company In High Demand

### Cheese Not a Money-Maker, Owner of White Cow Says

East Otto, NY—There's an untapped market in the US for high-caliber, traditional European dairy foods like butter, pudding, yogurt and custard available for farmstead dairy producers looking to stay in the black.

Retailers and consumers are on a quest for classic small-batch dairy foods, according to a New York State farmstead dairy owner who says he's romanced daily by shop owners across the country looking to carry his product line.

White Cow Dairy is the food extension of Blue Hill Farm, a fourth-generation family dairy operation run by Patrick Lango.

***"It's a great raw commodity to make food out of, but selling milk and drinking milk is a nutritional waste of time. There's no money in it."***  
—Patrick Lango, White Cow Dairy

"Before we were a food company, it was one guy in a kitchen in a barn where we live, which is right next to the cow stables," Lango said. "I set up a sink and a stove and went through the dictionary of dairy foods, making just about everything you can make from milk."

The core of White Cow Dairy's philosophy is blunt and direct: milk is useless.

"It's a great raw commodity to make food out of, but selling milk and drinking milk is a nutritional waste of time," Lango said. "There's no money in it."

"Selling milk just doesn't work anymore," he said. "It's 87 percent water – it's not going to pay your bills, especially small farms like ours."

We got sick of getting hammered, Lango said. Big business is never going to be able to market us – we're a nuisance to them; a small pick-up. So we said "Let's lose this."

White Cow Dairy currently milks between 20 and 30 cows. The majority of the milk still goes to a cooperative, and a smaller fraction is dedicated to the food project.

"We used to milk 60 cows, and our goal is to milk 10 or 12," Lango said.

"I basically buy our milk for four times what the current milk price is, because that's what it's worth to me. Then I turn it into food, which nets good value," he said.

"What this means is, a small farm like ours can milk one-quarter or one-half of the cows for the same amount of revenue, and cut one-quarter to one-half of their production costs, including labor, grain, et cetera," Lango said.

When you get a decent price for your milk, you can milk less cows, he continued.

Farms used to be able to make a living milking a handful of cows – it's not like that anymore, because the system changed, Lango said.

"You need to alter the system and give people the right price for a well-made, small-volume production item. That's what our model is built upon," he continued.

### Farmstead Companies Should Avoid Bottling Milk, Making Cheese

When looking to add value to his dairy plant, Lango made an almost immediate decision not to make cheese.

"Farmers make two basic mistakes when they try to convert out of the system: first, they think they should be bottling milk," Lango said.

"It's too expensive and the wrong way to go, because milk is not the object. Milk food is the object," he said.

Farmstead cheese, however, is a very labor-intensive food that's difficult to make and doesn't produce a high yield, Lango said.

"It's a tremendous amount of labor, you have to make a lot of it in order to do well, and you have to charge what its worth," he said. "It can be done properly, but that's a hard way to go."

When you start looking at what you can make from milk, recipes for pudding, custard, yogurt, panna cotta, creme fraiche and cheesecake spring to mind, Lango said. If you're small like us, you can take all these foods and go straight to your farmers' market.

"Farmers' markets are where we knock out a lot of our dairy kitchen stuff," Lango said. "In order to stay alive, we make our basic foods – our sauces and our puddings – and send them to Murray's Cheese in New York City."

Once a week, a truck from White Cow Dairy makes the trip from East Otto to Murray's Cheese in Manhattan. Lango, along with his wife and son, live in the hayloft of an 1860s barn directly adjacent to the dairy farm. The first floor of the building has been renovated into a 1,000-square foot New York State-certified dairy plant.

Our objective was to cook with milk, and not be limited to cheese, he said. When you look at the menu of dairy foods with milk as the primary ingredient, milk goes into more things than you can possibly imagine.

When I first met with New York State agents to figure out what kind of a license we would get, I had to emphasize how we cook with milk – entirely different from pasteurization, Lango said. For instance, our custards and puddings are made with cooked milk.

Through a process of self-invention, it took White Cow Dairy a total of seven years to certify and establish itself.

"Because of small-batch processing, it takes a lot of understanding on both sides to make everything work within the dairy standards," Lango said.

Dairy inspectors needed to understand that what White Cow Dairy was selling wasn't milk, but rather acid food.

"It goes in as milk, and comes out as an acid food, which is a low pH of 4.5 with a whole other set of processing and handling," Lango said.

White Cow Dairy packages its products in glass, prints its own labels and makes its own deliveries.

The biggest sellers at White Cow Dairy are yogurts and whey drinks called "dairy tonics," which are "so old they're new," Lango said.

"All we've really done here is take a page from history and mix it up," he said. "Our goal was to make traditional milk-based foods as close to the way they were originally made as possible."

We also run a really fun flavor lab, Lango said. Last fall, the company came out with pumpkin and butternut yogurt. Antique spices for whey tonics range from sumac to anise, and the whey drink made with raw honey, Cayenne pepper and turmeric consistently sells out.

### **Selling Exclusively In New York State**

Despite countless offers, White Cow Dairy sells its products exclusively in New York state. Dairy items can be found in specialty and health food stores, farmers' markets and 11 Wegman's locations across the state. A 5.5-ounce yogurt and 12-ounce dairy tonic both sell for about \$2.99 a piece.

Famed New York City cheese retailer Murray's Cheese also carries White Cow puddings, dairy tonics and yogurts.

"Murray's is a really cool place, because they found out about us five years before we were licensed," Lango said.

The retailer sent out a letter to every cooperative extension agent in every county of New York state, looking for traditional European-style dairy foods – not cheese, however.

Lango was first contacted by Murray's in 2002, and was genuinely surprised no other company was doing what White Cow Dairy was doing – making traditional European farmstead dairy foods.

"What's the big deal? I couldn't believe people in the Hudson Valley and Vermont and the Finger Lakes weren't doing this. They basically said, 'We want you more than anything in the world, and we'll wait for you.' So they waited five years for me to get a license," Lango said.

"So the first place we sold our products wasn't at a farmers' market or down the road – it was all the way in Manhattan at Murray's Cheese," he continued.

Those were the only people who understood our food, though, he said. We tried to pass our products around Buffalo, and consumers were like, "What?"

White Cow Dairy eventually won over New York State residents, and is currently partnered in the creation of a small producers market in Buffalo. The company will package, flavor and do a small amount of cheesemaking at the new facility.

"We do make cheeses like Quark, but there's not a great deal of value in cheese," Lango said.

Completion of the new facility is slated for 2012, and will house a pasta maker, a bakery, a wood-fired oven, and a pickling operation in the basement – an indoor farmers' market called Horsefeathers Community Market.

### **Goal To Grow Slowly, Avoid Debt**

For a such a small, family-owned and operated business, the ratio of publicity White Cow Dairy receives is "off the charts," according to Lango.

The operation intercepts daily offers from retailers across the country to carry its products, most of which are respectfully declined.

"Candidly, if we had the capacity to take up every offer we got, this would be an amazing business, but we can't," Lango said. "It's good, though, because we want to grow slowly, and not take on debt."

As far as selling beyond New York State, we may have the capacity with our new facility, but that would also involve USDA – a whole other thing for fresh dairy when you cross state lines, Lango said.

As far as other states, we'd like to get together with similar farms and get them to do what we do, or partner with us in some way, Lango said.

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—Patrick Lango

We came up with this concept creatively, because like everyone else, we were beating our heads against the wall, Lango said.

"We're not in the black yet, but we like what we're making and we're not going to quit farming," he said. "That's what it's all about – not quitting."

For more information, visit [www.whitecowdairy.com](http://www.whitecowdairy.com).

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