
MICHAEL SCHMIDT

THE RAW DEAL

BY KAT TANCOCK



Michael Schmidt pouring raw milk for an eager customer at the Picnic at the Brick Works in September.

Michael Schmidt is on a mission. The Durham farmer wants all Ontarians to have the right to drink raw, unpasteurized milk from their own cow – even if that cow is living on another person’s farm. He continues to wage his crusade despite the hardships he has had to endure during his fifteen-year battle. “I can’t stand injustice and I can’t stand complacency,” he explains. “I’m always very passionate with respect to what happens to the farmers.”

Originally from Germany, Schmidt has been farming in Canada for twenty-five years. On his Glencolton Farms, Schmidt runs a dairy and cheese operation and a bakery, and raises his own meats. He adds that, “We have our own orchard [and] we make fresh apple cider and stuff like that. Besides that we have cultural events like symphony in the barn. It’s a combination of culture and agriculture.”

The raw milk saga began when Schmidt’s customers inquired about purchasing milk directly from the farm. This was not legally possible under Ontario Milk Marketing Board regulations that required not only that all milk sold in Ontario be pasteurized, but also that farmers could sell their milk only to the Marketing Board.

In 1992, Schmidt developed a “lease-a-cow” program in an attempt to get around the regulations. Customers paid him for a share of a cow in exchange for milking services and raw milk. Two years later, government officials informed Schmidt he was breaking the law. Since they told him it was perfectly legal for him to drink the milk from his own cows, however, he continued with the program – rationalizing that his cows’ leaseholders were also drinking milk from their own cows.

But the government clamped down: officials arrived at the

Photograph: Laura Berman

farm, confiscated property, and charged Schmidt with providing raw milk. A lengthy legal battle ensued, and the legal costs he incurred resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the family farm and the cancellation of its insurance policy. Schmidt eventually pled guilty to the charge in order to save the rest of the farm, and was put under two years' probation.

In March 1995, in an effort to cooperate with government officials, Schmidt proposed a research project to the Government of Ontario and the Ontario Milk Marketing Board (which in August 1995 would merge with the Ontario Cream Producers' Marketing Board to become the Dairy Farmers of Ontario). His proposed that the three work together to find out whether it was truly possible to produce safe raw milk. "Our leaseholders were all supportive," Schmidt says. "It would have been a totally transparent operation where we would produce the milk, it could be tested, and our customers could be tested and monitored." But government and industry officials were unwilling to participate. Schmidt gave a press conference that same day, proclaiming that he would continue to provide raw milk to his customers even without a joint research program. He also made it clear that if government officials returned to the farm, he would go on a hunger strike.

For more than eleven years, the government left Schmidt alone. During this time, the lease-a-cow program became a cow-share program, whereby raw-milk devotees could purchase a quarter of a cow for \$300, with Schmidt providing them with the services of milking and taking care of the cow. (There are now between one hundred fifty and two hundred families in this program, and a long waiting list.)

Then, from June to November 2006, Schmidt noticed that his farm operations were under surveillance by, he would find out later, officials from the Ministry of Natural Resources. "I have documentation of how they followed the bus around, monitored the farm, and were photographing the whole thing," he says. They even kept track of the license plate numbers of farm visitors. On November 21, the same ministry, along with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Ministry of Finance, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, raided the farm – a seven-hour-long ordeal – and confiscated more than 300 litres of milk as well as other dairy products and equipment.

Two days later, at a press conference on the farm that attracted about two hundred people, Schmidt announced he would begin the hunger strike he had threatened almost twelve years earlier. It lasted four weeks, until a group of fifteen Toronto

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chefs including Jamie Kennedy and Chris McDonald promised to publicly support him if he ended his hunger strike, which he did at a rally at Queen's Park. "We milked a cow and handed milk out right on the premises of Queen's Park," says Schmidt, who praises Toronto chefs for the work they have done in promoting local foods.

On the recent one-year anniversary of the armed raid on his farm, Schmidt pleaded with government officials at Queen's Park to regulate the sale of raw milk. Premier Dalton McGuinty quashed Schmidt's hopes by responding, "The best advice we've been getting for over seventy years now is that unpasteurized milk is unsafe – so we're not going to change our position." Schmidt has spent the past year holding fundraising events to cover the legal costs of his defence. Prominent defence lawyer Clayton Ruby has taken on the case, which will go to trial in May 2008.

Like many nutrition-related health issues, the question of raw milk is a complicated one. Raw milk advocates claim that pasteurization and homogenization destroy valuable bacteria and enzymes in milk, rendering it unhealthy, and link pasteurized milk to medical problems such as allergies, cancer and heart disease. It is important to note that these proponents of raw milk also advocate a natural diet for cows: grass and hay, for the most part, as opposed to the grain- and corn-based feed most cows are fed today, as well as a lifestyle more in keeping with the way cows were raised before the advent of industrial farming. And they may be right: one recent European study, published in the May 2007 issue of the journal *Clinical and Experimental Allergy*, shows that drinking "farm" milk (i.e., raw milk that may or may not have been boiled) can protect children from asthma and hay fever. Health Canada, on the other hand, is firm in its belief that raw milk is unsafe, claiming risks of contamination with E. coli and other harmful bacteria. The sale of unpasteurized milk in Canada has been banned since 1991.

One has to wonder why the right to drink raw milk is so important to Michael Schmidt. Although he believes absolutely in its health benefits, it is not raw milk per se that's totally the issue. Rather, it's about the rights of the farmer to develop a relationship with the local market, and for consumers who care about their food to have the right to choose what they eat. "I think they should have the right to make a decision when they research the issue," Schmidt says. And as a farmer who raises and milks cows, he adds, it's offensive to be told the fresh milk is unsafe. "You're treated like a drug dealer," he says, pointing

out the hypocrisy of a government that continues to allow cigarettes to be sold in stores – and continues to reap the tax benefits from these sales – in spite of severe health implications and high smoking-related death rates in Ontario.

The right to drink raw milk also serves as a catalyst for Schmidt because of its status as, what he calls, one of the basic foods. "Almost everybody used to drink it," he says. "It's one of those heritage foods [that] people connect directly with nature." He grew up drinking raw milk, as did many of his customers, and he relates that, "a lot of people who grew up on raw milk are personally offended when they hear officials say it's bad." That being said, he concedes that milk sold in stores should be regulated, and notes that he has been pushing for standards for the sale of raw milk from the beginning, although "if it's a contractual agreement with customers in Toronto, I don't think the government should have the right to interfere at all."

"At both events [Feast of Fields and the Brick Works Picnic], we provided samples of real Rich And Wholesome Milk. The response was overwhelming. For most people, it was almost like wine tasting. 'Oh that is what real milk tastes like,' was the response of many, as well as, 'that is how milk used to taste...'"



The Glencolton Farms bus, in which guests at Feast of Fields were offered free samples.

This battle has taken up many years of Schmidt's life, but for him it's part of the larger fight for the revival of sustainable – and profitable – small-scale farming. "The best land of Ontario is buried under Toronto subdivisions," he says. "It's a totally self-destructive reality." He notes that Canada is not self-sufficient when it comes to food, and that if North America's transportation infrastructure were disrupted, Toronto would have enough food for only a few days. His solution? Partnerships between farmers and urbanites through which city dwellers rediscover the art of producing their own food and farmers regain the ability to earn a decent living.

Local eating is more than an environmental issue, and more than a health issue. Choosing locally grown and produced foods, especially for urban residents, is about reconnecting with the land, with the seasons, and especially with the farmers who produce the food we eat. And the battle for raw milk is symbolic of this connection, which Schmidt believes is what will eventually save our farmers. "It's not just the milk," he says. "It's the right to make a decent living by developing a relationship with the local market." Furthermore, "knowing your customers is additional compensation for a profession whose members are chronically overworked and underpaid," says Schmidt. "You see the children, the families – you see that they're happy. The farmer-consumer link for us happens to be centred around raw milk." □