



Horse milk producers Frans and Nadine de Brabander in Belgium are in the unusual business of selling horse milk and horse milk products.



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Got Horse Milk? These Innovative Farmers Do

There's no demand yet in the U.S. or Canada, but horse milk producers Frans and Nadine de Brabander have built quite a business in Belgium.

They're selling all the horse milk and horse milk products they can produce. They're the largest of some 30 horse and donkey producers in Belgium. There are also a handful of producers in the Netherlands.

Horse milk contains high levels of vitamins A, B1, B2, B6, B12, C and K. It's a good source of iron, potassium, calcium and phosphorus, and several micronutrients. It's low in fat and lactose, but albumin-rich, which makes the milk more easily digestible. It's used for all sorts of reasons, from treating certain diseases to a so-called energy booster.

The Brabanders sell fluid and frozen whole milk, freeze-dried powdered milk, yogurt, ice cream and a plethora of processed products from shampoo and soap to foot and facial

creams, balms and aftershave.

According to an article in the Draft Horse Journal, the Brabanders began milking mares in 1997 after a family member, suffering from Crohn's disease (an intestinal disorder) found that drinking a small amount of mare's milk greatly improved his condition.

At the time, the closest place to buy fresh mare's milk was in Holland. Recognizing the potential to sell horse milk, the Brabanders began by milking Belgian Warmblood ponies they already owned. Before long, they switched to Brabants (the original name for Belgian Draft Horses). The larger mares produce nearly twice as much milk as ponies and the mild mannered draft horses are easier to milk than skittish ponies.

The business grew so quickly that by the end of 1997, Nadine left her job to work full time on the horse dairy. Frans followed a few months later. The business has been

profitable and continues to grow.

Getting into the horse milking business is relatively easy. No special housing is needed for the milking mares or for their foals. The Brabanders buy mares with foals by their sides. They are kept on pasture with their foals in one big herd.

Mares aren't milked until foals begin eating hay, grass and concentrates, usually at about eight weeks of age. Once the foals begin eating other feeds, the mares can be milked without taking food away from them. Early every morning, the Brabanders separate the mares and foals. During the day, they milk the mares every two-and-a-half hours, usually five times.

They use vacuum milkers similar to those used in milking cows. It takes only a couple of minutes per mare per milking. One minute is spent cleaning and stimulating the mare's udder, which is essential to begin milk flow.

Once milk begins dripping from the teats, it takes less than a minute for the automatic milker to do its job. One Brabant mare produces about 1.3 gallons a day.

To assure a more wholesome, more acceptable product, the Brabanders don't use any drugs or other medications on the mares during their lactation periods. Their housing and processing facilities are inspected regularly by health officials.

As far as FARM SHOW can find, there are no horse milk operations in North America.

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Farmer Olympics Adds Fun To County 4-H Fair

Many county fairs and farm shows have team competitions of one sort or another, with names like Farmer Games or Agriculture Olympics.

For a couple of years now, the 4-H Farm Olympics have been a big hit at the Henry County Fair in Indiana, says Gerry Yanos, Straughn, Indiana, who organized the contest two years ago.

Groups of 4-Hers or 4-H alumni enter as teams, with six or seven members per team. The rules state a minimum of six and a maximum of seven team members.

The Farm Olympics consists of seven events. Only one member of each team competes in most of the events. One - the wheelbarrow race - requires a rider and a pusher. And the final event, the big round bale roll, must be completed by all members working together.

The events, in order performed, are:

1. Get Dressed for Work Here, contestants must run to the closet (a chair in the center of the arena) and put on bib overalls, a coat, hat, gloves, and boots. Once dressed in the intentionally oversized clothing, they must run to the "barn," or finish line. All clothes have to cross the line with the contestant. If anything falls off, it has to be picked up and put back on before finishing.

2. Feed the Hogs In this event, contestants grab a bucket, run to a water tank filled with shelled corn and fill it up. Then they run to a

gate, open the gate and go through, then close the gate so hogs don't get out and dump their bucket of corn into a trough (another bucket). If they don't manage to get to the trough with enough corn to fill it, they have to go back to the water tank for more corn.

"One bucketful of corn is enough to fill the trough bucket, if they fill the bucket full and don't spill any getting to the trough," Yanos says.

3. Gather the Eggs This one's pretty self-explanatory. Five eggs have to be picked up and carried in a small basket over the finish line. There is a 5-second penalty added to times for each broken egg.

4. Fix Machinery If you've ever hunted frantically through a can or bucket of odd sized bolts and nuts for the right ones to put something back together in a hurry, you'll understand this event. A container holds the right bolts to fit several holes in a steel plate, mixed in with a little bit of everything else.

5. Feed the Cows In this event, contestants have to pick up a small square bale, carry it across the "barnyard" and throw it over a gate. They then have to proceed through the gate, closing it so the cows can't get out, and then place the bale in a "bunk" (a square marked on the floor). With the hay "fed", they then have to go back through the gate, closing it completely and finally, race back to the finish line.

6. Wheelbarrow Race While one



Photo courtesy Farm World (Website: www.farmworldonline.com)

A team of farm women rolls a bale of hay across the exhibition hall floor during the 4-H Farm Olympics competition, held each year at a county fair in New Castle, Ind.

contestant rides, another pushes the wheelbarrow around an obstacle course. While no penalties are given for spilling the load, just the act of uprighting the wheelbarrow and reloading adds time.

7. Round Bale Roll The entire team rolls a big round bale across the arena and back.

"We used freshly baled and wrapped straw. Bales are tight and even so they roll straight IF they are pushed straight," Yanos says.

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