

Desert Dairy Products

Look for a milk camel farm in your neighborhood soon.



WALKING DOWN THE AISLES in the supermarket, most people don't look twice at the alternatives to cow's milk: rice, almond, goat, soy. But in a few months, you also may be passing a carton of camel milk.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) passed a bill in 2009 permitting the commercial sale of camel milk in the United States; once the required test kits and systems are in place and dairies begin to meet the FDA dairy requirements, we could start seeing camel milk for sale in stores as early as July or August.

Camel milk is garnering attention as researchers find a number of health benefits in its proteins, including being a safe option for lactose-intolerant individuals, easing symptoms of autism, having high vitamin C levels, and aiding diabetics. (For more information visit www.CamelMilkUSA.com.) Studies by the Diabetes Care and Research Centre in India reported camel milk can supple-

ment approximately 60 percent of insulin for diabetics. With obesity rates increasing and diabetes following close behind, consumers will be searching for new products.

Farmers are looking to "milk" the approaching market, so a burgeoning cottage industry has appeared. Since it will be the first time in U.S. history when camels will be in dairies, savvy farmers familiar with the health benefits of camel milk are educating themselves on the unique care required by this exotic and surprisingly gentle creature.

Most of the several thousand camels in the United States are in zoos and animal parks, so camels on a farm are a rarity.

Climate

Camels are associated with deserts, however, they're extremely adaptable creatures, and some thrive in the cold of Russia. Camel owners are all over the United States; farms have started anywhere from Amish country to Arizona.

Diet

"Hay is for horses," and is a sore subject when it comes to camel diets. Some owners are adamant about supplying hay; others believe a camel's diet should be high in grains. In its native habitat, the herbivore will eat just about anything it can find, including shrubs, leaves, grasses and even thorn bushes.

Dr. Gerald Parson, an Oklahoma veterinarian specializing in large animal care for more than 25 years, recommends avoiding grains. Sue and Scott Menges of Oklahoma keep their camels on pasture full time and provide a grain free of antibiotics. Because camels feed on the ground, worming is imperative. When the time comes for camel dairies to distribute their milk, they need a wormer safe for dairy cows; other such medications may not be safe for dairy animals when the milk is used for human consumption. Also, camels like a lot of loose salt.



ON THE WEB

Friendly, inquisitive camelids are more than the perfect pet.



Forever Safe Farms (www.ForeverSafeFarm.org) in Salem, Ohio, established by Rob and Karrin Campf, is a haven for rescued exotic animals. Above, Rob leads a caravan of camels out to pasture. Opposite, Karrin nuzzles a few members of the haven's camel herd. PHOTOS: DUNE GUMRE (2)

"Other places we go, I see blocks of salt, but camels' tongues are not like cows' tongues," Menges says. "It needs to be a loose salt."

Breeding

Unfortunately, camels experience a high stillborn and miscarriage rate. According to Dr. Millie Hinkle, founder of Camel Milk USA, one in four pregnancies will be unsuccessful. It's doubtful that such statistics will stop the spread of camel dairying, though, and better feed and herd management may help improve fertility and birth rates, according to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Also, Dr. Hinkle says don't be duped into buying a camel that can't produce milk; make sure and have a pregnancy test done, and be sure the adult comes with the calf. Females can't produce enough milk to dairy without the offspring attached.

Although each state's law is different, in most states, it's permissible for a camel dairy to sell milk directly to customers, in opportunities called "camel sharing." These entail multiple people investing in (or leasing) a camel, then each "owner" takes a turn in receiving the milk produced. Other U.S. camel owners use the milk for other value-added niche markets, like soaps, until proper dairy regulations are established. Until then, those interested should do their due diligence in learning everything possible about camel care.

"Get books and learn as much as possible," Parson says. "Read up and visit the farms."

— Tara Lynne Groth

Assisting Your Soil

Specialists at the Natural Resources Conservation Service can lend a hand.



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SOIL MAY WELL BE our country's most precious natural resource – we'd certainly starve without it. But it's so much more than an agricultural substrate. Soil is key to the carbon, nitrogen and water cycles – abuse it and you negatively affect the air you breathe and the streams that flow nearby, and you'll contribute to the demise of scores of locally adapted species. On the flip side, if you take good care of your soil, it will take care of you. But the formula for maintaining fine soil is a complex one. Thanks to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), you have a whole team of experts to help you figure it out.

Seventy-five years ago, the United States faced a major economic depression and an environmental disaster called the "Dust Bowl." From these events, a government agency was created called the Soil Conservation Service, an agency that still exists today. Now called the Natural Resources Conservation Service, it has staffs located in nearly every county in every state. The technically trained conservation specialists work one-on-one with private landowners to help manage and maintain the quality and productivity of our natural resources.



ON THE WEB

Understand your soil; it takes more than a test kit and fertilizer.