

In Morris, milk deliveries save families time, cut trips to store

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It's 2 a.m. Thursday in Chatham Township, and it's quiet except for crickets making their nightly courting calls and the hum of a gray truck pulling up to homes with MILK written in large, blue block letters on the side.

Then there's Ashraf Alfqelh, a blur as he streaks up front lawns with cartons of milk in his hands.

No one sees him in action, but when Morris County families wake up and start their day several hours later, they find their weekly milk delivery in the white steel insulated box outside their front door.

In two hours, Alfqelh has crisscrossed Madison and the Chathams to dozens of homes, passing a Whole Foods and Kings supermarkets, and doesn't slow down. Within 30 seconds of pulling up to a house, he grabs a milk order, deposits the items along with some ice into the milk box, races back to the truck and takes off for his next destination.

Alfqelh is not the milkman of the "Leave it to Beaver" era and neither are his customers.

Both are constantly on the run and rarely cross paths. Though this nostalgic practice harkens to a simpler time, it's geared now to helping families deal with the hectic lifestyle of 2007.

Home milk delivery nearly disappeared in the 1980s, no longer able to compete with the wholesale business to supermarkets. Today, home delivery accounts for less than 1 percent of the market nationally. But some Morris-area milkmen have persevered, holding onto a small but loyal following.

Alfqelh works for John Curatola, 51, of Pequannock, who bought this milk route 20 years ago, leaving the New York financial sector to spend more time with his family. Curatola is one of half-a-dozen small business owners who call themselves Morris County milkmen.

"It's a nice business," Curatola said. "It's a little bit of nostalgia in a busy world."



Curatola and his fellow milkmen follow an old, unwritten ethic that they don't cross into another's territory. Curatola's McDana Dairy serves 500 to 600 households in Morris and Essex counties, delivering milk to the Chathams, Madison, Butler, Kinnelon and Pequannock.

John Sebastian, of Sun Up Dairy, delivers to Morristown, Morris Township, Morris Plains, Parsippany and Hanover. Frank O'Brien, of Long Valley Dairy, serves Washington Township, Mount Olive and Roxbury. Jim O'Brien, his brother, of Shamrock Dairy, takes the Chesters, Netcong and part of Roxbury.

"It's not for everybody," Jim O'Brien, who has some 300 customers, said about the job. "I enjoy the freedom. The only hard part is you have to be there no matter what ... I only take one week off a year."

Many started delivering Welsh Farms products when the farm operated from Long Valley and actively promoted its home delivery programs. Since Welsh Farms was bought by Parmalat, which ceased milk processing at the Long Valley facility in 1999, several have had a harder time marketing themselves independently.

Some, like Gary Rogg, of Fairfield Dairy, got out of the home delivery business to concentrate on corporate accounts. Rogg, 37, of Parsippany, now concentrates on delivering milk to 50 corporations in Morris County, including Realogie and J&R Tobacco, which primarily use the service for their coffee stations. Rogg has just half-a-dozen home customers that he keeps because they're long-time customers.

"At one time, when business was at its peak, I was doing almost 14 hours of delivery a day," said the 60-year-old Sebastian.

Sebastian maintains about 250 home delivery customers in Morris County and also has a run in Monmouth County since he moved to Toms River four years ago. This now allows some to switch their deliveries to their Shore houses during the summer, he said. And though Sebastian requires most to have a minimum weekly order, he cuts some long-time customers a break, such as a 97-year-old Morristown woman who leaves his driver brownies in her milk box.

Sebastian and the others say their business survives through the loyalty of such customers and word-of-mouth for new ones.

Plus, some, including Frank O'Brien, have found that area residents want to support local businesses, so he collaborates with other small business owners, delivering their fresh apple cider or baked goods along with his milk products, which come from Harrisburg Dairies in Harrisburg, Pa.

"I think a lot of our staying power is partly about nostalgia and trusting that your milkman is selling a good product," O'Brien said.

Curatola said he recognizes that home delivery is a luxury service, but with milk prices averaging \$3.50 a gallon and projected to continue to rise this month, the cost difference for delivery is nearly non-existent, he said. Plus, everyone knows that a quick milk run to the supermarket often

results in a \$30 grocery bill full of impulse shopping, he said. If a customer needs something in addition to their standing order, either a call the night before or a note in their box solves the need for an extra trip to the store, he said.

Prices range from \$4 to \$4.50 a gallon among all the companies, which each touts exclusively hormone-free milk. For those willing to pay for the premium of organic milk, the price is about double -- \$4.50 a half-gallon.

"We're only 50 cents higher on the gallon than the stores," Curatola said. "It's a good time to sign up for milk delivery."

Curatola hired Alfqelth to share his driving duties about five years ago. For Alfqelth, 28, of Paterson, it's his first job of the day -- he also delivers donuts and works as a mechanic.

"I like it because it's quiet and you get to see nice houses," said Alfqelth, who has a wife and a 3-year-old son.

Although she's never seen him, Regina Kishbauch, 80, of Chatham Township said she can count on her delivery of milk, eggs, butter and half-and-half each week. Kishbauch has gotten milk delivered to her township home for 40 years. When she moved to town she didn't drive, so having the heavy milk cartons delivered to her door was a boon.

"I don't know what I'd do without them," Kishbauch said. "He's never missed a day."

Chatham Township Police Sgt. Vincent Zvolensky is one of the few customers Alfqelth does see. With a quick hello and wave, Alfqelth heads to the police department's refrigerator, restocking it with whole and skim milk and half-and-half.

"Without a doubt, he's like clockwork -- he's here every Thursday," Zvolensky said.

Tom Chisari, 38, of Long Valley, is a recent convert to the service. Five months ago, he and his wife called Frank O'Brien's Long Valley Dairy and set up an account. They both work full-time -- he is an insurance underwriter, she's a liability underwriter -- and were tired of running to the supermarket at 10 p.m. on a weeknight for milk for their two children, ages 5 and 2.

"It's a lifesaver," Chisari said. "It's about the convenience and the time we're saving by not running out at night on last-minute runs. It's here Friday mornings before 7:30 a.m., we put it in the fridge and then we're off on our way to work."

O'Brien took over Long Valley Dairy 20 years ago, and, like Curatola, left a stressful corporate job to spend more time with his family. He, too, boasts some 500 households in Morris and Warren counties.

"I was living on Route 80, spending three hours a day commuting and I was complaining to my wife how I hate my job," O'Brien said. "When I went to school I dreamed of owning my own business."

Then O'Brien saw a milk route advertised for sale and he decided to take a gamble because it meant he could be home with his family.

Yes, the hours can be tough, working from 3 a.m. until 8 a.m., but the new schedule meant he could be home with his children in the afternoon and evenings, allowing him to coach his three children's sports teams, he said.

Now, he's hoping his son will one day take over for him. In 1990, he recruited his younger brother, Jim, who has since spun off his own company, so he knows he can be persuasive.

"It's been a good life for me, I don't regret it," O'Brien said.

His customers know him well and even trust him with putting their milk directly into their refrigerators in some cases.

"He's great," said Audrie Sonzogni, 50, of Long Valley. "In blizzards, I've seen him coming up the driveway."

Sonzogni started the service 13 years ago, when new to town. With three young children, it was one less thing to drag home. At the height of her family's consumption, they were getting four gallons of milk weekly, she said.

Sonzogni also liked the nostalgic aura of having a milkman. She remembered having milk delivered to her home as a child and her husband's grandfather had served as a milkman back when glass bottles were the norm.

"It's a nice service, you don't get much of that anymore," Sonzogni said.

