



A2 milk producers get celebrity backing

Milk's back on everyone's menu

What is A2 milk? Who is producing it? And who is going to buy it? We spoke to Muller Wiseman Dairies and an A2 milk producer to find out more.

text Rachael Porter

Milk is firmly back on the menu for around 15% of the UK population, thanks to the launch of A2 milk in early October. Well positioned in supermarket chiller cabinets throughout the UK – and with some high-profile celebrity endorsement from Down Under – the ‘milk for the milk intolerant’ is already selling well.

No surprise then that Muller Wiseman Dairies’ agricultural affairs manager Pete Nicholson is pleased with progress so far: “We’re close to our anticipated targets and have ample reserves from our milk suppliers to cope with increases in demand,” he says.

A2 milk is already a resounding success Down Under. “In Australia it takes 4% of the market by volume, but 6% by value. There will always be a niche market there for A2 and it will never be main stream. But it is a value-added product,” says Mr Nicholson.

Product profile

He expects the same to be true here in the UK. A2 Milk UK – the company decided to brand the milk to add further value to the product and prevent under cutting from ‘own brands’ – is currently available in more than 600 stores across the UK – all of Morrisons and Budgens and selected Tesco stores in the south of England. More retailers will come on line throughout the rest of the UK after Christmas.

“The joint venture with Australia’s A2 Corporation has given us the product and the brand, and now we have to convince the ‘milk avoiders’ – those that can’t easily digest A1 milk – to give it a try.

“We’re urging these consumers to try milk again, initially with newspaper and magazine advertising, as well as a poster

campaign. A TV advertising campaign is scheduled to begin early in 2013 and some celebrity endorsement, from Australian and A2 milk drinker Dannii Minogue, is also serving to raise the product’s profile.” She was in the UK in November and was sponsored to help spread the word.

When it does take off, there are more A2 milk producers waiting in the wings. A total of 20 are signed up to supply the company at the moment with 15 already producing A2 milk – around 40,000 litres each day – and the remaining five set to start between now and June 2013. Four of the 15 herds are 100% A2, the rest have a mixture of A2 and A1 cows and heifers and are milking their herds as two separate groups.

“There’s a lot of extra hassle and some investment required in producing A2 milk,” adds Mr Nicholson. “We’ve also asked these producers to take a leap of faith and produce something new for a niche market. There’s been an element of risk, so we’ve helped financially with building modifications and testing cattle for the A2 gene. We have also committed to pay producers 2.5ppl more for all A2 milk produced than we do for milk on our standard contracts for the next two years,” he adds.

Producer progress

Richard Pilkington is one producer who’s taken the plunge and signed up to produce A2 milk from his 250-cow pedigree herd, based at Hope near Wrexham, in Flintshire. His interest was sparked by press release he saw in December 2011 and further investigation revealed that his unit, which he runs in partnership with his wife Ruth, was in the geographical area where Muller Wiseman Dairies was

looking for possible A2 milk producers. “It was the possibility to increase our income from milk sales that really grabbed me – the dairy was offering a 2.5ppl milk price difference for A2 milk. So we agreed to have our herd tested, to see how many cows were A2 producers,” explains Mr Pilkington.

That was back in January and he was delighted when the results came back: “We were surprised and please to learn that 48.5% of our cows were ‘A2’. We were told that the average for most herds is around 30, but we were close to 50%. That was a great start.”

He then decided to test his 250 head of young stock – tomorrow’s milkers. “We thought it was important to check them, before we went any further. The score came back at 38%, which was still good despite being 10% lower than the milking herd.”

With the herd’s ‘breeding’ already looking promising, Mr Pilkington decided to sign up to the A2 contract. “Once we did this, the dairy released the test results for the individual cows and heifers in the herd so we could group them for milking. We had to split the herd and run it as two groups – A1 and A2. We’re milking 125 A1 and 125 A2 cows.”

He also had to invest in a second-hand bulk tank, to ensure that the milk from the two ‘herds’ was kept separate. “I thought that was the least cost option but installation, as well as a compressor and the extra pipe work needed, meant that it ended up being a larger investment than we’d hoped. That said, the dairy gave us some financial help towards that.”

Cow ‘swapping’

He says that the company has also been supportive in helping to source A2 milkers to buy in and add to the A2 herd. “We tell them which cows and heifers we want to buy and they pay for the test to see if they’re A2 before we go ahead and make a deal.”

Mr Pilkington has also done some ‘swapping’ – selling A1 cows and heifers and buying in A2 cattle – and he’ll do more in the future. But he stresses that he’s very careful about what he’s buying in – and not just from an A2 milk perspective. “I don’t want to buy in a load of trouble. I’m particularly concerned about Johnne’s disease. So I’m very stringent on herd health.”

He works closely with his vet, Ben Pedley from Cheshire’s Willows Vet Group, to ensure that his herd’s high health status is protected. “Ben talks to the vendor’s vet

Select A2 sires for success

To breed A2 heifers, producers must use A2 sires on their herd. And there are plenty of bulls to choose from, if you're looking for your slice of this niche market.

"Using only A2 sires does limit the choices of sires available for your herd's breeding programme," says Avoncroft's David Matthews. As the UK distributor for CRV, his company has access to A2 bulls.

"To breed high yielding, long lasting and profitable cows, it is important to maintain genetic gain in key production and type traits, and correct for any problems. But, if everything else is equal, then the A2 bull would be a good choice.

"It will take about 10 years for producers to convert their herd to A2 through breeding alone, so I can see a market for sales of A2 heifers and cows," he adds.

CRV Ambreed New Zealand tests its sires for their A2 status.

"We have more than 30 A2 Holstein bulls. We also have two A2 tested German Brown Swiss bulls from Spermex – Huray, who is the number-one PLI Brown Swiss, and Juleng."

Some well-know and widely used Dutch bulls are A2.

"Himster Grandprix, Delta Canvas and Poos Stadel Classic were all A2 sires, with many daughters milking in the UK.

Current A2 sires include Ralma O-Man CF Cricket, Woudhoeve 1042 Impuls and red-and-white sire Aalshorst Pleasure," says Mr Matthews.

A2 bulls from New Zealand include eight Holstein Friesians, including Kalumburu, Delux and Hydraulic, and 14 Jerseys,

including New Zealand's highest ranking Jerseys Manzello, Murmur, Pioneer and Dominic.

"What's interesting is that these are all high ranking bulls in New Zealand, particularly in terms of selecting animals to turn pasture into profit. We also have a Montbeliarde, Bonsai, and the cross-bred bull Mack, which are both A2."

Woudhoeve 1042 Impuls is one of the A2 bulls



and ensure that the cattle are disease free. We also look at NMR data, for things like cell count and other disease testing reports, such as that for Johne's disease, to make sure we avoid any trouble. If we're not happy about an animal, we walk away.

"I want to produce as much A2 milk as possible, but not at the expense of herd health."

Breeding his own A2 replacements is preferable and he's using A2 bulls almost exclusively. "There are thousands of sires

to choose from and maybe 100 or so are A2, but that's still a wide range to choose from. So it's not narrowed our breeding focus," says Mr Pilkington, who is still very much into type combined with high genetic merit cattle.

The herd average stood at 9,300 litres before the recent switch to three-times-a-day milking (another bid to increase the milk cheque in the tough economic climate) and cows are currently averaging 31 litres a day, at 3.98% butterfat and 3.17% protein.

Mr Pilkington waved off his first tank of A2 milk on October 8 and is pleased with how things are going so far. "It's early days and it's hard work. Managing the herd in two distinct groups does create extra work and the move to three-times-a-day milking means that we're milking for around 12 hours each day.

"We'll get there eventually, through a mixture of home-bred replacements and bought-in stock. And it will get easier as we gradually move to becoming a 100% A2 herd." |

A2 is aimed at 15% of the population

A2 milk is suitable for people who experience digestive problems with conventional A1 milk, but who are not lactose intolerant. Around 20% of the population avoid drinking milk but, according to the National Health Service, only 5% are lactose intolerant. It's the remaining 15% who the milk is aimed at. "The difference between the two milks is in the amino acid make up of the beta

casein protein," explains Muller Wiseman Dairies' agricultural affairs manager Pete Nicholson. "Weaknesses in the amino acid chain of A1 milk results in some breaking away and forming a chain of seven amino acids, which can cause issues with digestion in some people.

"If you go back 1,000s of years, there's was no A1 milk. But, over time, mutations in the herd mean that A1 has become the norm."

A2 advocate: Dannii Minogue

