

„Sometimes I'm a little stubborn“

Josef Jacobi, a farmer with body and soul, brought the first German GMO-free milk to the public.

He got a dairy going that was run by farmers, and blocked a toxic waste dump. Creating or stopping big projects – Josef Jacobi does both. The thoughtful giant from eastern Westphalia who keeps moving on, straight ahead, is respected even by political opponents. His political allies consider him a ‘pioneer’ and they call him “mountain in the Brandung”.

In 2005 he won a German innovation prize for his “producer-fair milk” model pricing system, in which a 5 cent surcharge on every litre of organic milk goes directly to the producer. Consumers accepted the model and sales grew. In 1989 Jacobi and his tractor blocked British tanks that were threatening to ruin the village of Körbeck’s freshly paved main street. A group of farm colleagues quickly formed and forced them to retreat. The general had to apologize. The regional radio station (WDR) named Josef Jacobi („Sometimes I’m a little stubborn“) as “Farmer of the Year.”

One of his newest projects is „Hill Pasture Milk”, the first conventional (non-organic) milk in Germany that is certified “without genetic engineering.” The producers’ cooperative of 45 dairy farmers from the Sauerland guarantees that only GMO-free feed and medicine are used. Until now the label “without genetic engineering” existed only in Austria and Italy. The impetus for Hill Pasture Milk came from the Upländer Farmers’ Dairy, where Josef Jacobi is chairman of the board of directors.

The Upland Farmers’ Dairy, which otherwise receives only organic, thus also GMO-free milk, processes the “Hill Pasture” into fresh whole and skim milk. Since the middle of 2005 “Hill Pasture” is offered in all Tegut food stores in Hesse, northern Bavaria, Thuringia, and southern Lower Saxony. “That has to expand,” says Jacobi. The German supermarket chains Rewe and Globus will have the “GMO-free” milk on their shelves soon.

Jacobi took over the farm in the Westphalian town of Körbecke near Kassel from his parents in 1972, and since 1980 has been running it according to national organic (Bioland) standards. He was born in Körbecke on November 9, 1945, the middle child of seven. It is known that the land in the fruitful Warburger Börde has been in his family at least since 1612. Older church records were burned.

Josef Jacobi lives there today with his wife Heike and their children Lena, Hannah and Julius. “I make all decisions so that one of the children can take over the farm”, he says. Their operation includes 25 hectares of open land and 74 hectares (185 acres) of cultivated fields. Crops include, in rotation: clover, winter wheat and rye, field peas, tricolore, spelt and seed sugar beets. The Jacobis have 40 milk cows, calves and a breeding bull, an old German ‘Schwarzbunte’. He would like to get more involved in breeding, but has no time. There are also 50 pigs to fatten and 12 laying hens. In the farm’s cheese factory, Heike Jacobi now makes more than 10 different kinds of cheese.

When the European Farmers’ Association (cpe) was founded in Madrid in the 1970’s, Jacobi (“in the meantime I am somewhat impatient”) was there. In the early 1980s he stood out in the organic farmers’ organization ‘Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft’ (AbL) by speaking out against milk quotas. When the AbL needed to find a new national chairperson, a delegation arrived in his kitchen in Körbecke. They won him for the post and from 1986 until 1996 he led the AbL.

When in 1994 Upländer’s dairy in North Hesse closed after a merger with the Cologne-Wuppertal milk factory, Josef Jacobi worked hard for the take-over of the facility as an organic dairy. The negotiations were tough, but successful. In 1996 the “Upländer Farmers’ Dairy” started up with 18 organic farmers and an annual total of a million liters of organic milk. Now 84 farmers participate, delivering 15 million liters of milk.

From milk to the countryside. The “Citizens’ Initiative (BI) for Healthy Bördeland and Diemeltal” is still another area of action for Jacobi. The BI opposed construction of a toxic waste dump until the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia finally dropped the project. They brought a strong feeling of community and a lot of momentum to the region, BI co-founder Josef Jacobi recalls: “We want to institutionalize that”. A center for the countryside was founded, which meanwhile employs seven college graduates and assistants. They work successfully for the protection of the region’s culture and landscape. So what’s next? „Bringing the organic associations together”, is what Josef Jacobi sees as an “achievable short-term goal”. Not to make everything the same (“I am always for things that are different”), but to get rid of sources of friction. To be specific: to put petty jealousies behind and create one umbrella organization for collective marketing. There is always something to do – for someone like Josef Jacobi.

Yvonne Mabilie

Polenta maize: When it’s delicious, that’s the one!

Alvaro Ferrari is proud of the quality of his polenta. It is something special. Because the retiree makes it from old local varieties. The preservation of original varieties is his passion.

From Lucca you must leave many winding kilometers through the mountains behind you before arriving at the long, narrow village of Galligano. There Alvaro Ferrari waits in his old car at the edge of the road so we don’t miss the turnoff to his small farm. There’s no time for long greetings and introductions. The strong, bristly grey-haired retiree leads us behind his modest house to show us his project. It is late fall and there is lots to do at harvest time.

The bounty is striking. Little mountains of corn cobs lie on the terrace, sorted by size and quality. Behind them, grain already stripped from the cobs lies spread out to dry in the last warm rays of sun. Maize is everywhere, bright shiny orange, also hanging in little bunches tied up, as in so many regions of the world, beneath the rain gutters.

This maize is special. Alvaro Ferrari grows “Granturko Garfagniano” again; with its especially long cobs, it only grows here in the valleys. Actually Ferrari’s family never stopped planting the old variety. But before they only grew a little on their small field, which they ate themselves because it made such a creamy and delicious polenta. However since Ferrari, who worked most of his life as a truck driver, retired, he has also started marketing the crop. On a small scale: “It’s my passion and keeps me busy.”

Word has spread about Ferrari’s productive hobby, and now neighbors bring him their old varieties too. Five years ago one came by with a cob darker than red wine, of the variety called “Otto File” in Italian: eight columns, as the grains are arranged in eight rows. “The old man said, ‘you always talk about polenta,’ Ferrari recalls, “ ‘but have you ever seen this? If anything tastes good, then this!’ ” And he had a point. So Ferrari put it in his repertoire, at first mixed in, ground, with his own variety, but later sold separately so as not to lose its own intense taste.

Ferrari likes to have things “as they were always done.” Thus he uses neither genetic engineering, nor artificial fertilizer, nor pesticides. Just to make sure, he even got his own mill. Who knows what could otherwise get mixed in with his precious, hand picked and harvested maize? The mill stands in one corner of his basement, in the other he seals the coarsely ground grain in bags. Together with 10 other farmers he founded the brand Garfagniano, now sold through a retailer in Lucca to Italian health food stores and gourmet restaurants.

Galligano is one of a number of islands in the sea of industrialized maize production that has otherwise flooded the country. But not many farmers market tradition.

On the other side of the Italian boot, in Ancona, biologist Roberto Papa goes after these old local varieties on behalf of the European Union. To prove the “definitive introduction” of GMOs, one has to know what was there to protect before possible crosses with GMOs. “What has happened in Europe since hybrids were introduced?” To answer this, Papa and his colleagues roam through the gardens and fields of hobby gardeners, regional museums and professional farmers across Europe, mapping the diverse varieties of maize still around today.

They have found thousands of old varieties in Italy alone, mostly in the mountains, in any case in places where it was uneconomical to grow high-performance crops. They were almost always grown for personal use. The greatest diversity was found in Romania. The old varieties, says Papa, are morphologically and genetically almost unchanged, despite the presence of hybrids.

And they are also prepared as before. Above all polenta, with its many different side dishes. But he also fries up sweets from his maize, Alvaro Ferrari tells us. “Or, the very best, a kind of crostini you eat with a little ham on top as an appetizer.” That was a family recipe, “that I divulged to local restaurants,” the Luccan farmer says. “Now they make it my way.”

He is proud of the quality that he produces. But he doesn't really care about a huge demand. More important to him is the work that has kept him busy year round and connects him with the earth. “I was always closer to it than my brothers were. And I can't produce more than I am now.”

Karla Pedrotti