



# Flavor, not health claims, key in marketing pasture-based cheese

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## Research Brief #66

A small but growing group of consumers is paying attention to the health benefits of milk and meat from animals raised on pasture. Meat and milk from grazed ruminants have higher levels of “good fat” than ruminants fed stored feeds. Conjugated linoleic acid, or CLA, is one of those “good fats.” Some people claim that CLA can inhibit the growth of cancerous tumors, enhance immunity, reduce cholesterol, and replace fat with muscle. Can dairy farmers raising cows on pasture capitalize on these health claims with specialty cheese?

Laurie Greenberg and Darcy Klasna of Cooperative Development Services, in partnership with CIAS, researched the health claims surrounding CLA and the market potential for CLA-rich cheese in 2001. They found inadequate research to support the human health claims about CLA at that time. And they learned that cheese buyers care more about flavor than CLA. In the current market, high CLA content won't sell cheese. But other characteristics including superior flavor, cooking qualities and local family farm production can boost sales of pasture-based specialty cheese.

### CLA and health claims

Fatty acids like Omega 3s, Omega 6s and linoleic acid are the building blocks of all fats. Essential fatty acids like CLA are not produced by the human body, and therefore need to be consumed as part of a healthy diet. Foods with the highest naturally occurring levels of CLA are whole milk and whole milk dairy products, and beef, lamb, and goat.

Once abundant in North American diets, CLA intake is declining. This is partly because people eat less meat and animal fat. Additionally, most animals today eat more grain than grass, reducing the CLA levels in meat and dairy products. Meat and milk products from animals fed exclusively on pasture can contain 3-5 times more CLA than meat and milk from animals fed grain-based diets.

In laboratory research on animals, CLA has been shown to fight some types of cancer in

animals and cell cultures. CLA supplements in livestock diets produced leaner pork and higher protein, lower fat cows' milk. CLA research in humans has focused on reducing body fat and increasing muscle mass, not cancer prevention.

Greenberg contacted five scientists whose research focuses on CLA, and summarized their comments: “The specific type of CLA that appears in dairy foods has been shown to have some positive effects in animals, however, **no health claims can be made for humans.**”

### Cheese buyers' thoughts on CLA

Greenberg and Klasna interviewed nine potential buyers of CLA cheese in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Five buyers were from retail stores and four were from food distributors. They represented both high-end stores and natural food markets. Only one buyer had heard of CLA; all had heard of Omega-3 fatty acids but associated them with eggs and salmon. There were no CLA claims on any of the cheese sold by these buyers.

“None of the buyers that we interviewed believe that CLA claims, even with demonstrated health benefits, would sell cheese alone,” Greenberg reports. Instead, these buyers identified three major characteristics of cheese that drive selection and purchase.

**1. Flavor.** Flavor was unanimously the number one reason people buy cheese. All of the buyers



*Growing markets for specialty cheese focus on flavor, cooking characteristics and price. Health claims don't sell cheese.*

interviewed insisted that flavor, including texture, is the primary characteristic influencing specialty cheese purchases. "People need to taste cheese. That's the most important reason people buy cheese," said one cheese buyer.

**2. How it cooks.** The way a cheese melts, slices, shreds, spreads, and bakes is important. The buyers reported that more and more people are cooking with cheese, and restaurants are increasing their use of cheese in main courses.

**3. Price.** A competitive price is important to consumers. Most buyers stated that consumers won't pay a premium for cheese because of CLA. However, consumers will pay more for exceptionally good quality cheese.

## Pasture-based cheese opportunities

The market for specialty cheese in the U.S. is growing. A report from the U.S. Gourmet Foods Specialty Market showed that U.S. specialty cheese sales grew 17.5% between 1996 and 2000. Can farmers and cheesemakers capitalize on this trend with high CLA cheese?

Based on this study, the answer is "no." Substantial market demand for cheese with CLA simply does not exist at this time. Eight of the nine buyers interviewed had never heard of CLA, and they all believed that their customers did not know what CLA is. But pasture-based cheese with other qualities may succeed.

Since flavor sells cheese, cheesemakers should focus on taste and texture. Cooking qualities and price will also sell cheese. At this time, consumers are not willing to pay more for a pound of cheddar cheese with a high CLA content than they would for any other natural aged cheddar. They may pay \$1-2 more per pound for organic cheddar, however.

There is a market for certified organic cheese and cheese produced without hormones or antibiotics at natural food stores. Buyers from

## CLA and pasture-based cheese: Constraints and opportunities

### Constraints for marketing cheese with high CLA content:

- No health claims can be made about CLA for humans at this time.
- Most cheese buyers don't know what CLA is.
- The current market demand for CLA in foods is limited.
- A consistent supply is important for certain buyers, which may be a problem for seasonal cheeses made from the milk of grazed animals.

### Opportunities for marketing pasture-based specialty cheese:

- The market for specialty cheese in the U.S. is increasing.
- There are market opportunities for organic cheese at natural food co-ops.
- Local/regional and farmer-owned products are attractive at natural food co-ops.
- A product labeled 'no added hormones, no antibiotics' is attractive at natural food co-ops.
- Omega 3 fatty acids are familiar to consumers and more marketable than CLA.

natural food markets also were interested in local/regional and farmer-owned products. Identifying the region where a cheese comes from appears to be a good marketing tool.

## Marketing tips from cheese buyers

"The buyers told us that a combination of education, promotion, and in-store demonstrations would be the most effective way to sell pasture-based cheese," Greenberg notes.

"Since taste is one of the most important characteristics for selling cheese, all of the buyers agreed that the best way to sell cheese is to let customers taste it at in-store demos," Greenberg says. Combined with promotions like sales, coupons, and in-store ads, in-store demos increase the likelihood that a customer will recognize the cheese in the cheese case.

Labels should claim high levels of good fats, but keep them simple and readable.

"Don't market cheese based solely on health claims," Greenberg says. "The strongest recommendation buyers have for those interested in specialty cheese is 'market your advantages' whether that be excellent flavor, local or regional production, or pasture-based animals."

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*The Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) brings together university faculty, farmers, policy makers, and others to study relationships between farming practices, farm profitability, the environment, and rural vitality. Located in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the UW-Madison, it fosters multidisciplinary inquiry and supports a range of research, curriculum development, and program development projects. For more information on the Center or on the research in this Brief, contact: CIAS, 1450 Linden Drive, UW-Madison,*

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