

# Swedish farmers' future turning sour as milk's popularity wanes

ENKOEPIING, Sweden: Already feeling a Europe-wide price squeeze, Sweden's dairy farmers are also being cornered by dwindling milk consumption and legal tussles with boastful non-dairy competitors...



© Kennerth Kullman – [123RF.com](http://123RF.com)

Today the 100 cattle on Peter Engvall's snow-covered farm are no longer the cash cows they used to be.

"It's almost never enough to pay the bills," he told AFP on a freezing winter day north-west of the capital Stockholm.

Sweden's milk industry - whose produce was once heralded by doctors, schools and parents alike - is increasingly on the back foot.

While household milk consumption in the European Union has remained relatively stable, in Sweden it has dropped by nearly half since 1980.

As Swedes' dietary habits have changed milk is not the mealtime staple it once was, and its defenders appear to have gone quiet.

Consumers showed little sympathy after the lobby organisation LRF Milk last year filed to sue Oatly - a small non-dairy competitor - for claiming in advertisements that unlike milk, its product was "made for humans".

"It wasn't long ago that more or less everybody would have come to the defence of milk," said Haakan Joensson, an ethnologist at Lund University.

"Now it's the other way around. Milk is seen as the establishment, as Goliath bashing David," he added.

It wasn't always this way.

Milk held a central position in Swedish society for the better part of the 20th century, nourishing families and an industry backed by politicians, researchers and consumers.

## The milk propaganda

In 1923 - a few years before it had been established as a household drink - the broad-based lobby *The milk propaganda* was founded and formed a coalition between farmers, the dairy industry, doctors, schools and ordinary people.

By 1930, milk had become "the obvious mealtime beverage for all Swedes, several times a day," Joensson said. Soon the lobby had school pupils compete to have their drawings picked for milk advertising campaigns.

A widespread notion of milk as the cornerstone of a healthy diet lent the industry exceptional public credibility.

"Milk wasn't seen as a special interest," Joensson said. "When the dairies' posters said milk gives you strong legs, it was natural for politicians to endorse it into the 1980s and 90s."

The beverage's strong standing now appears to be waning. A study by researchers at Uppsala University published in October held that milk intake may in fact be linked to bone fractures and higher mortality - a far cry from the commonly held Swedish notion that it is essential to children's diets.

New draft guidelines to nutritionists from Sweden's National Food Agency issued in November recommended that milk consumption be limited to one or two glasses per day, prompting an outcry from the dairy industry. "Our meal patterns have changed," Joensson said. "Food habits changed before beverages. After a while it wasn't as natural to drink milk with Thai curries and pasta."

Milk consumption continues to drop and fell 20 percent between 2002 and 2012, according to the Swedish Board of Agriculture. "It's related to a general anxiety (about food)," said Maja Nordstroem, a dairy consumption expert at the LRF Milk lobby group.

"May I feed my children sugar? Should I eat meat, should I choose this fish? It's natural for people to question things," she said. For Nordstroem, the industry will survive by exploiting slight upticks in cream, yogurt and sour milk products over the past decade - with increases around 10 percent - and by diversifying its products.

Arla, a major dairy producer, has sold milk especially branded for barista coffee since 2005. Protein-rich cheese curds are being touted in fitness circles.

But dairy farmers can tell the crown jewel in their production isn't in demand the way it used to be. "It's obviously not a cool drink to sit and sip at a cafe," said Engvall, who when asked to describe the history of his dairy farm on a graph, sketched a straight downward slope.

"But it's something natural, after all, that at least isn't dangerous," the 59-year-old added. But it seems the glory days of the industry are gone. "The greatest engagement (now) is not for milk but against it," Joensson said. "That is a sign that something big has happened."