

Raw milk between risk acceptance and storytelling

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There is a small but interesting sign that perhaps the cultural battle over raw milk can be won—perhaps it has already been won and we haven't realized it yet.

Granarolo has launched a UHT milk, meaning sterilized at high temperatures (between 135 and 150 °C), which prominently states on the packaging “from raw milk.”

Now, technically, this statement is meaningless.

What else would they be processing, if not raw milk? Milk already pasteurized (i.e., brought to 72 °C for at least 15 seconds)? And why would they add an extra processing phase (and thus cost) to a finished product (which a second heating process could only damage from an organoleptic point of view)?

In reality, that statement is not technical; it serves a marketing purpose: and if Granarolo believes that evoking raw milk on the packaging is effective because consumers are drawn to it, it's worth reflecting on.

The war on raw milk is nothing new

About fifteen years ago (2009), an inter-ministerial decree was passed requiring raw milk distributors—then fairly common in cities and towns—to prominently display the warning: “Product to be consumed after boiling.” A media campaign, among others, had launched an attack against raw milk itself, deemed a risky food due to dangerous bacteria it might carry.

That campaign was highly successful. Raw milk vending machines are now nearly impossible to find. Farmers producing raw milk—who had to comply with stricter rules and undergo more checks than those producing milk for pasteurization—became discouraged. Many abandoned that line, partly due to not-so-subtle pressure from industrial milk giants, who threatened to stop buying the rest of the production from companies that insisted on selling raw milk. Considering that raw milk sales accounted for only a tiny share of these companies' production, the threats worked.

That inter-ministerial decree was just one battle in a long war against raw milk—a war that occasionally subsides only to resurface in waves, with raw milk being attacked by the industry, the medical field, veterinarians, and targeting not only raw drinking milk but also raw milk cheeses. That was a battle that producers and consumers lost, a victory for an industrialist and fundamentally lazy idea of hygiene, safety, and agriculture.

Producing raw milk requires skill

Why lazy? Because raw milk is produced in clean, healthy farms that thoroughly and competently monitor the entire production process.

Raw milk offers double richness: on one hand, a great bacterial biodiversity (which benefits our microbiota), and on the other, a wide diversity of microflora.

Pasteurized milk, in contrast, is not completely sterile—because to achieve that, every trace of life would need to be eliminated, making it not only less nutritious but also unsuitable for cheesemaking (as is the case with UHT milk, which cannot be used for cheese). However, the bacterial load in sterilized milk is dramatically lowered, and its microflora is nearly

extinguished. This is why it has a long shelf life, but also why it has less flavor, and cheeses made from it have a narrower, standardized organoleptic profile. Moreover, pasteurized milk needs to be treated with industrially selected starter cultures, otherwise, it will not curdle—contributing further to its limited complexity and variability.

Let's say that pasteurized milk undergoes a powerful sanitizing step at the end of the process (pasteurization), while raw milk production must ensure maximum hygiene at every step (including barn and animal cleanliness). If something in this process fails, raw milk simply doesn't go to market.

If it does get used, it means it meets all the requirements, both as a beverage and as a raw material for cheesemaking. It transfers to cheese not only its full organoleptic qualities but also all its nutritional and health properties. Even more: raw milk cheese can sometimes forgo rennet entirely; in this case, we speak of lactic coagulation cheeses, where bacteria naturally present in the milk initiate the curdling. You can understand that for this to happen, the milk must be nearly perfect. Indeed, the likelihood of finding pathogens in raw milk cheeses with lactic coagulation is extremely low.

However, this doesn't mean that risk doesn't exist—statistics and case studies confirm that risk exists even with pasteurized milk: most large-scale cases of listeria or botulism occurred in major industries processing pasteurized milk. Also, while no special recommendations exist for pasteurized milk and its cheeses, when it comes to raw milk and its cheeses, guidelines clearly advise that preschool children, pregnant women, the elderly, and immunocompromised individuals should avoid raw milk and unaged raw milk cheeses. In many countries (not the EU), it is forbidden to sell raw milk cheese aged under 60 days. Indeed, healthy and live milk eliminates nearly all potential pathogens during aging, which are completely absent in long-aged cheeses. In any case, raw milk cheeses, fresh or aged, must clearly state "raw milk product" on the packaging (or on the whole wheel). Not as a marketing ploy like Granarolo's UHT milk, but to properly inform consumers, especially those in high-risk categories.

For everyone else—generally, healthy adults with functioning immune systems—the issue of pathogens presents a risk comparable to that of countless other foods: raw meat, raw vegetables, raw eggs, many cured meats, bottled water left in the sun...

Zero risk does not exist

Here, we must clarify the core issue: zero risk exists only in mathematical models. It cannot exist in reality.

We talked a lot about zero risk a few years ago. It was the COVID era, and the demand for certainty was often overbearing. I wrote about it on my blog back then, and Michele Serra expressed it more authoritatively in his column *L'Amaca*, writing: "What does not exist, in any aspect of life, from conception to childbirth, is zero risk. Zero risk is metaphysics. (...) But real life, sorry, is a physical matter."

We know this well and follow sensible rules to reduce risk—but we don't delude ourselves that rules eliminate risk.

Every day we accept the possibility of some risk, fully aware that there is no other way to live. We trust others—otherwise, life would be hell: the barista who washed the spoon we stir coffee with, the driver who slows down near crosswalks, the legislator who requires restaurants to flash-freeze raw fish, the supermarket that maintains the cold chain of our frozen goods.

Milk as the origin of our existence

So, what happens with milk? Likely, milk is not just any food. The rivers of ink anthropologists have spilled on it show that it's one of the symbolic foods anchoring our Mediterranean (and beyond) food culture. Bread, milk, olive oil, wine—all passed through every level of industrialization and modernization without losing their aura of sacredness. They are not merely products we consume; they are products that shape us—our bodies and our memories—and for this reason, they appear in a remarkable number of rituals and myths. Consider milk: in Greek, *gala*—our planet Earth belongs to a galaxy called the Milky Way.

The thought of risk, when it concerns such fundamental elements of our being, becomes intolerable—not a matter of stats or percentages, but intimate and existential: the idea that something symbolizing life might, however minimally, carry death.

80% of Italian cheeses are made with raw milk

This is what we confront every time someone proposes banning the sale of raw milk—including when it's used in extraordinary cheeses that sustain our food culture and local/global economies. We're not talking niche products—we're talking mozzarella, caciocavallo, Grana Padano, Parmigiano Reggiano—around 80% of Italian cheese production.

Above all, we're talking about thousands of highly skilled farmers delivering near-perfect milk (even though perfection doesn't exist); a supply chain not just commercial but wise and cultural: a network of knowledge, best practices, and competencies about animals, the environment, and people—things we cannot, by law, boil. Then everyone can act at home as they see fit (by the way, a large portion of the 8,000 annual foodborne illness cases in Italy originates at home, due to poor storage or cold chain mishandling). But calling for laws to eliminate risk defies common sense. Every year in Italy, around 3,000 people die in traffic accidents. We have speed limits, DUI penalties, and a highway code—all designed to reduce risk. We don't think of banning cars—it wouldn't make sense.

Rationalizing a mythical food

The effort we must make is primarily one of rationality, even before science or regulation. In *Food System 5.0*, Alex Giordano explains:

“The three hacking tools I (we) use in our method are: the Mediterranean diet as a symbolic-value area; technologies—especially data and artificial intelligence—together with collective intelligence; and communities, understood as communities of place, intention, and practice. These are three tools I suggest using as combined lenses to rethink our current social, economic, cultural, and ecological paradigm.”

When we talk about raw milk, this “lens combination” becomes essential. The vision defect to correct isn't one single distortion—it takes patience and precision to focus the problem clearly.

The *Fondation Lait Cru* has done this well with a concise, free publication explaining the differences between raw and pasteurized milk. Regarding cheese, it doesn't shame pasteurized milk cheeses (some are excellent) but suggests them—since they are “easier”—not only for high-risk groups but as an entry level, a gateway to the more complex flavors that raw milk cheeses can offer.

Owning a technology—like pasteurization—doesn't mean we must use it in all cases, especially if it means giving up extraordinary foods. We need widespread information and awareness. Eliminating raw milk from our food landscape is not an option. And if even Granarolo has realized that... happy raw milk to everyone.

Thanks for their availability and patience:

Federico Infascelli, Giandomenico Negro, Roberto Rubino, Piero Sardo

For further reading:

- <https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.2903/j.efsa.2015.3940>
- https://www.fondationlaitcru.org/IMG/pdf/affiches_lblc.pdf

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/raw-milk-risk-and-storytelling/>