

Galicia's first brand of 'female' milk



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Begoña Pardellas has spent the last 27 years tirelessly breeding and milking cows. Based in Guntín, in the heart of the northwestern region of Galicia, she is one of the thousands of women who are essential to the region's milk industry but whose work, until now, has gone unseen behind the stable walls. She intends to change that and has teamed up with other female farmers to produce Rural Muller (Rural Woman, in Galician), Spain's first brand that only bottles milk purchased from women.

"The supermarkets need to know that we are here and that, like many men, we are running the show at a lot of farms," says Pardellas. "We need a symbolic brand because as female farmers, we are usually shut away in the stables and no one recognizes our work in the outside world."

The brand, which was created by the nonprofit Federation of Associations of Rural Women in Galicia (Fademur), currently only sells fresh milk, which is distributed in the province of Lugo. But it is working with the dairy industry and distributors to branch out into long-life milk, which is more commonly found in Spanish supermarkets. The association hopes to see its cartons hit the shelves throughout the country in the early part of this year.

The story of Rural Muller neatly sums up the effects that the enduring economic crisis has had on families who make a living in the dairy industry. Historically low milk prices and drought have pushed women to the forefront of half of the 8,500 dairy farms that still survive.

The initiative may seem like empowerment, but it is not. The steady drop in dairy prices has left women in charge of the impoverished dairy businesses, while the men have gone out in search of industrial employment that can support their households.

Fademur, however, wants to turn sexist gender roles on their heads and convert the crisis into an opportunity for women and their families. Women have taken control of the unique small-scale farms and cattle grazing, which are linked to a traditional and environmentally friendly way of life.

"We want the milk to be for mass consumption but not lose the environmental and social labels that help turn the women into the driving force of the economy and of the villages, and guarantee that no one is getting pushed around," says Rosa Arcos, President of Fademur.

Arcos says that Spain's dairy industry has exploited producers, with the industry always setting the price that farmers were able to charge. However, with the blessing of the central government, farmers came to a historic agreement at the end of 2015, allowing them to set prices.

"They aren't complying with the new policies," Arcos complains. "The government of Galicia just recognized that there are more than 600 farms that charge less than 22 cents per litre when the agreement doesn't allow prices under 31 cents."

Rural Muller aims to charge a fair price for its milk. At the same time it wants to guarantee consumers that, unlike other brands, the money spent on its products in supermarkets will go to farmers.

Fademur wants the revenue to help women who took the initiative and clambered aboard their tractors, while in other regions of Spain women on farms were shut away in the kitchen and play no role in decision-making bodies such as cooperatives and agricultural associations. It wants to use the talent of people like Pardellas, who besides raising cows and running a farm business, also brought up two children and took care of three elderly people.

Research Themes

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