COLUMNS

Outwitted by dairy product

By: **Matt Rocheleau** | February 21, 2010 |

Don't cry over spilled milk, but spoiled milk is another story.

Of the many trials I have endured since gaining college independence, none have been quite as troubling and equally annoying as figuring out the freshness of the stuff in my fridge – namely milk.

To determine whether the opaque white dairy liquid is okay to drink, I first check the "sell-by" date printed on each gallon or carton; but, every time it just confuses me
more.

The date stamped on my 3.78-liter jug is helpful to employees stocking shelves at Cumberland Farms, but what does it mean for me? Is milk still safe to drink after the "sell-by" date? If so, for how long?

Some people say, "Just pop the cap and see if it smells bad." However, I have no idea what milk is supposed to smell like – good or bad. And even if I did, it would likely take the snout of someone like Froot Loops cereal mascot Toucan Sam to distinguish the difference; after all, if you "Follow his nose, it always knows!"

The only way I really know whether milk has soured is to taste it, which hurts my ego. Drinking sour milk makes me feel betrayed and at the same time outwitted, because I should have known better than to trust a substance that is squeezed from a cow's utters.

From time to time, I even psych myself out. In the same way that milk's scent is a mystery to me, I'm never quite certain what milk is supposed to taste like, because I rarely drink plain milk. I'm always adding coffee, strawberry or chocolate syrup, or mixing it up with a bowl of cereal. So, when I do a milk taste test, it seems to taste a bit off. Initially, I'll think, "Well, I don't really like milk by itself, anyways." But then, I'll think that maybe the bad taste is not my displeasure for milk by its lonesome, but rather that the dairy product has expired.

It's all very stressful, especially considering I like to drink milk in the morning, before my brain is able to handle this level of decision making. Throwing milk out without discretion is expensive. Even more costly is drinking expired milk; after all, six teenagers died in 2008 from suspected food poisoning after drinking sour milk at their boarding school in eastern India, according to the International Herald Tribune.

Thus, in hoping to resolve this conundrum, I turned to what may be the second coming of Jesus Christ – Google.

The miraculous search engine led me to an article published in BusinessWeek in 2006 which said, "Pasteurized milk usually remains fresh for five days after its 'sell-by' date. However, if milk isn't refrigerated promptly, it will develop a sour taste and spoil, even though it might not necessarily be dangerous."

What's more, milk loses vitamins when exposed to light, the article said.

Dairy going bad "also varies widely from product to product and brand to brand," according to an old, but still relevant, New York Times piece from 1982.

Great. So apparently time is not the only factor in creating spoiled milk, it also depends on the whether it has been kept at the right temperature and in the right lighting from the time it is made in some far away factory all the way until the time you gulp it down. And, it also depends on who makes it.

At no fault to Google, that search turned out to be about as useful as a "sell-by" date.

I know it's trivial, but it would be nice if someone could tell me exactly when that red-labeled, half-

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empty gallon of whole milk should be transported from my fridge to the trash, without having to call my mom to seek her instinctive advice.

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