

The Press Democrat

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Petaluma's Clover Stornetta Farms is changing its name



Clover Stornetta Farms President/CEO Marcus Benedetti holds their new look packaging for 2% milk, right, and the old version in front of the new logo in their Petaluma business offices.

Petaluma's Clover Stornetta Farms, the Bay Area's largest dairy producer, is about to make a change dramatic enough that consumers will notice immediately: It will become Clover Sonoma.

But Clo the Cow will remain the much-loved mascot.

The 40-year-old company is changing its name, rebranding both itself and its milk cartons with a word that "evokes a sense of a positive place," said President and CEO Marcus Benedetti.

"The rolling hills out here have to be conveyed" to consumers in Southern California and other distant locales, said Benedetti, sitting in an office that looks out across the

expansive wetlands of Shollenberger Park to the hills south of Petaluma.

Sonoma County, which increasingly is viewed as a place for premium wines and artisan foods, is also "the best place for milk," he said. Most of California's milk is produced by large dairies in the Central Valley and Southern California.

Starting today, the public will get its first chance to buy Clover Sonoma products in the new packaging. They include the company's first conventional milk certified to be free of genetically modified organisms.

First, all conventional milk sold in Clover's new half-gal-

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Clover Stornetta Farms unveiled their new packaging this week. The new design, shown here with the older version to the left, extends to all various products produced by the Petaluma-based company.

Ion cartons will be “nonGMO.” Within two years the company will make all its liquid milk products, such as cream, half-and-half and buttermilk, GMO free in all its various size containers. Its organic milk has always been GMO free. Even as it rebrands itself, Clover is also changing its ownership structure into a benefit corporation, a business whose goals will include not only making a profit but having a social conscience, providing social and environmental benefits.

The company recently was certified to qualify as a B Corporation, or “B Corp,” by the nonprofit group B Lab, which created and awards the certification. Clover is now completing the required paperwork for the switch.

Benedetti’s grandfather, Gene Benedetti, and a group of partners formed Clover Stornetta Farms in August 1977. Today the company is owned by Marcus Benedetti and two cousins, Michael Benedetti and Mkulima Britt.

Clover today is the region’s dominant milk company. In Sacramento and the Bay Area, Clover last year sold 59 percent of all the fluid milk purchased among nonstore brands, according to results the company released from AC Nielsen data.

The Clover Dairy brand dates back to 1916, which last year prompted Clover Stornetta to make the pun that it was marking “100 Years and Cownting.”

Stornetta became part of the company name at the founding when Gene Benedetti and partners purchased the Stornetta Dairy near Sonoma. Marcus Benedetti said that putting Stornetta in the name was important then because the dairy, established in 1932, was the major milk supplier in the Sonoma and Napa valleys.

But “the Stornetta name was but a chapter” in the Clover story, he said. Adding “Sonoma” to the company’s name “will be enduring.”

Clover’s rebranding received high marks from two local observers with expertise in marketing and the retail food business. Both said the addition of the word “Sonoma” to Clover’s name will help the company expand its reach to consumers beyond the Bay Area.

The word has a powerfully positive association.

“What are we known for here? High-quality food. It makes perfect sense,” said Roy Gattinella, an instructor of marketing and business at Santa Rosa Junior College.

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Southern California residents may never have heard of Clover Stornetta, he said, "but Sonoma, they know."

Tom Scott, retired CEO of Cotati-based Oliver's Markets, said the change will further cement the link in consumers' minds between Sonoma and quality foods.

"There's no brand that says Sonoma County like Clover," said Scott, who retired last summer after more than 40 years in the grocery business.

For Gattinella and local consumers, an immediate question was whether Clover's iconic bovine will appear on the new packaging.

The answer is that Clo the Cow, arguably the county's most famous business mascot, will remain on the cartons.

"She's absolutely something that's part of the brand and will continue to be," Benedetti said.

The move to rebrand the company addresses the risk "of lost opportunity," Benedetti said.

It also helps simplify and clarify the brand. Clover's current packaging designs appear as two different brands, Clover Stornetta for conventional products and Clover Organic Farms for the organic line.

Benedetti said having one name and a similar appearance among the company's 150 different packaged items will answer a key consumer question: "What brand is it?"

About 85 percent of the company's milk comes from Sonoma and Marin counties, with the remainder from one dairy in Humboldt County and another in the Central Valley.

For Benedetti, it's appropriate for Clover to add the name "Sonoma" because it's "where we call home."

Scott maintained the "Sonoma" label fits even if every drop of milk doesn't come from a cow milked in the county.

"Lagunitas beer isn't made in Lagunitas," he said. "It's an homage to where they came from."

In regard to becoming a benefit corporation, Benedetti said a number of well-regarded companies also have made the change, including ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's, clothing maker Patagonia and water bottle maker Klean Kanteen.

He said Clover has "a social compact with our consumers" that dates back to his father, Dan Benedetti, and his grandfather, Gene Benedetti.

"We are a different type of business," he said. "Our mission is to elevate dairy."

Both Gattinella and Scott said the restructuring to a B corp. will resonate with certain consumers. That is especially the case with millennial shoppers.

"They get it," Gattinella said.

Scott said the switch to a B Corp. is good news for the county because it means Clover's owners expect to keep the company for a long time.

"It's not a move that a company that's planning on selling would make," he said.

Gattinella said he was relieved to learn that Clo will remain the Clover mascot. Her cartoon-like presence on pun-filled billboards is "part of why we love where we live."

"I'm happy," he said, "that her contract's been re-upped."