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A Peek at the Dairy Breeds

Holstein-Friesians are the big black and white cows.

If dairy cattle were one big corporation, the Holsteins would hold controlling interest and then some.

About 80 per cent of U.S. dairy cattle, registered and grade, wear those black and white markings. Not bad for a breed which had two inauspicious tries at immigration to this country before finally making it.

Holsteins probably came with the Dutch to New Amsterdam. But the early arrivals (human), distracted no doubt by the rigors of getting settled, neglected to keep the cattle bloodlines pure, and those first Holstein-Friesians had no lasting effect on the development of the new nation's herds.

Then, in the 1850's, a Massachusetts man imported some of the black and whites. But the Commonwealth of Massachusetts ordered them destroyed during an outbreak of animal illness.

Undaunted, the New Englander imported more in 1861. Today black and white cows produce roughly 85 per cent of the nation's milk — a real success story for the Holsteins!

The other breeds were immigrants, too, and their names are tip-offs to their homelands — as with those aptly dubbed Brown Swiss.

A short historical footnote on their importation to these shores: one of the first bulls to arrive wore the proud Swiss name of William Tell, no less.

Brown Swiss were the ones being addressed in the immortal line, "How now, brown cow?" They're dark brown, in between brown or light brown — all over. County Ayr, Scotland, is where Ayrshires first were bred.

Ayrshires are mottled red and white in varying proportions.

Milking Shorthorns is that breed's real name but they were known as Durham cattle for some time in this country because Durham, in Yorkshire, England, had become a center for the breed.

Milking Shorthorns can be red, roan or white — they look more like beef cattle than the other dairy breeds — and are, indeed, a dual purpose breed.

Jerseys hail from the English Channel Island of Jersey, as might be guessed.

Monks on another, the Isle of Guernsey, crossbred two famed French dairy types to produce their own. A visiting Yankee sea captain bought a pair to take home to his brother in New Hampshire. By coincidence, the brother farmed on another island which soon became known as Cow Island. The title has become formalized to Guernsey Island,

courtesy of an act of the state legislature.

So, if your travels take you to the Northeast, you may come across both the breed and the island named after them. Once coming full circle when you consider that the first Guernseys were named after an island!

Fawn and white means Guernsey. Unless the cow has a black muzzle with a light ring around it — then it's a Jersey.

Jerseys can also be all fawn without the white markings — keep your eye on the muzzles!

American Cheese?

"American Cheese" has English ancestry.

It's really Cheddar, first made in this country soon after 1620 by the Pilgrims. The English called it Yankee Cheddar to differentiate between it and their homemade variety.

American cheese has also been called, among other names, yellow cheese, store cheese, Heikim's County Cheese and — most American of all — apple pie cheese.

Incidentally, the town of Cheddar in England no longer produces cheese.

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