



## Miracle food a healthy choice

**I**t is the fastest-growing product category in grocery store dairy cases, and its different forms seem to be able to do everything from relieving constipation to enhancing immunities and heart health.

So what is this miracle ingredient? It is the healthy micro-organisms — or probiotics — in yogurt, the centuries-old byproduct of fermented milk. Europeans have known of its original health benefits for thousands of years and swarmed to the probiotic varieties over the past decade and more, and now, Canadians are fast catching on.

“A 2007 study shows that yogourts were a \$966-million business in 2007, up 7% from 2006,” says Solange Heiss, assistant director of marketing and nutrition communications at the Montreal-based Dairy Farmers of Canada.

“Today they are the biggest product group in grocery store dairy cases, accounting for 11.3% of all dairy products sold,” she says.

Since 2001, demand for yogourts has grown by about 50%, according to the magazine *Grocer Today*. And behind that remarkable growth are Canada's 13,000 dairy farmers, the majority of them in Ontario and Quebec.

Yogourts and other fermented milk products are just another example of Canadian farmers working with government and food processors to create new products that improve the health and lifestyle of Canadians, Ms. Heiss says.

What lies behind probiotic yogurt's marvelous health benefits? It is the micro-organisms — beneficial bacteria — that milk creates when allowed to ferment under controlled conditions, says Dr. Gregor Reid, chair of human microbiology and probiotics at the Lawson Health Research Institute in London, Ont.

“Taken in sufficient numbers — in the billions plus — they seem to confer health

benefits,” he says. “Five years ago, nobody in Canada had heard of it. However, the Japanese have been tracking those benefits since the 1930s, and the Scandinavians for the past 15 years or so.”

In Sweden, a nine-year study of 82,000 people showed that those who ate cultured milk products had a 38% less chance of contracting bowel cancer, a disease that affects more than 330,000 people a year globally.

“The micro-organisms in certain probiotic yogurt appear to produce fatty acids, which help regulate the bowel and prevent constipation,” Dr. Reid says.

His research also leads him to suggest that those beneficial bacteria may modulate the immune system and possibly produce cancer-fighting agents in the stomach, protecting not just the bladder but the respiratory tract and vagina as well.

The result of worldwide research has allowed food processors to create a range of new probiotic, yogurt-based food products from Ontario dairy farms, Ms. Heiss says. Different formulations address different health benefits. At the same time, processors have introduced a wide range of new products in forms as varied as squeezable tubes, frozen yogurt desserts, soy-based beverages and those that blend fruits with yogourts.

Yogurt is a good carrier for probiotic bacteria, making this a key growth area for dairy — and for consumers proactive about their health. The key, experts say, is finding the yogurt product that yields the benefits best-suited to the consumer's needs and opting for those that have been clinically tested.

**For more information, visit  
[www.growourfarms.ca](http://www.growourfarms.ca)**