



By Mhlengi Thabethe

Milk matters

Balancing value & innovation in South Africa's dairy aisle

<https://stockcake.com/i/grazing-dairy-cow>



As South Africa prepares to mark World Milk Day on 1 June, the country's dairy aisle is reflecting far more than a staple category. Milk has evolved into a dynamic retail space shaped by affordability, nutrition, convenience, innovation and changing consumer lifestyles.

Despite ongoing economic pressure, milk remains one of the most resilient products in the FMCG basket. It continues to be a high-frequency purchase consumed across multiple occasions – from breakfast tables and lunchboxes to cooking, baking and on-the-go nutrition. At the same time, the category has diversified significantly, with consumers increasingly looking for products that deliver both value and functionality.

According to Statista, South Africa's milk market is expected to generate approximately R12.25 billion (US\$747.73 million) in revenue in 2025, with steady growth forecast over the next several years. The broader dairy category also continues to benefit from sustained demand for staples such as milk, yoghurt and cheese.

What is changing is how consumers shop the category. Retailers and suppliers are increasingly balancing affordability with quality while responding to growing demand for healthier, more convenient and more functional dairy products.

The evolution of milk in South Africa

Historically, milk occupied a straightforward role in retail as a routine household essential. Today, the category reflects broader changes taking place across FMCG, with consumers becoming more intentional about value, functionality and health benefits.

Economic pressure remains one of the biggest influences on purchasing behaviour. Consumers are increasingly price-sensitive, driving demand for long-life/UHT milk, private label dairy products and smaller, more affordable pack sizes.

At the same time, health-conscious consumers – particularly younger shoppers – are fuelling growth in lactose-free milk, high-protein products and functional wellness beverages.

Marisa Maccaferri, Marketing Executive for Woodlands Dairy and First Choice, says the category has evolved far beyond a single-product offering.

"Milk today is less about a single product and more about meeting consumers where they are in their lives," she says. "Our portfolio has evolved to reflect different lifestyles, life stages and usage occasions; from everyday family nutrition to targeted functional needs such as high-protein for recovery, satiety and active living."

She adds that innovation is not only about launching new products. "It's also about continuously refining and repositioning what already exists to remain relevant, whether that's improving nutritional profiles, enhancing taste and functionality, or adapting formats for convenience."



Why dairy for all-day focus and energy



She says, "Sustained energy is critical for everyday focus, performance, appetite control and balanced nutrition. When your energy is properly balanced, you're less likely to experience dips in concentration or fatigue. You also reduce cravings for quick-fix snacks and overeating. We achieve sustained energy through both our daily life-style habits and our food choices."

We all know how it goes. It's another crazy-busy day, and just when we need sharp focus and steady energy, we start to feel that dull slump coming on. Suddenly, we're reaching for an extra-strong coffee or something sweet for a desperate pick-me-up. This might help for a moment or two, but that quick fix often leads to your slump becoming a full-blown crash.


According to Maretha Vermaak, Registered Dietitian at Rediscover Dairy, what we need here is a shift in mindset ...



Maretha Vermaak

“ Instead of turning to caffeine or sugar as a fast but empty remedy, we could be eating in a way that supports sustained energy. ”

“ Certain foods such as high fibre, complex carbohydrates, good quality protein and nutrient-rich dairy play a vital role in naturally sustaining our energy over the busiest of days. ”

On 1 June 2026, World Milk Day offers a global moment to appreciate the many benefits of affordable and accessible milk and dairy. So, whether you're packing a lunchbox, needing a midday brain boost or recovering from an evening workout – milk, maas, yoghurt and cheese are there to help you not only go the distance, but to find that prized balance in your everyday life.

How to fuel yourself for longer

The first step to achieving steady energy is smart eating habits. If you often experience energy slumps and crashes, you might reconsider having the three traditional meals a day.

Instead make smaller, more frequent micro-meals using nutrient-rich ingredients a daily habit.

Look for ways to be active as often as possible on working days, by taking the stairs, a break for stretches or a quick walk to refresh your mind and help regulate your energy.

The second step is to choose the right mix of foods by making tasty combinations of nutrient-rich foods to slow your digestion, leaving you full for longer and helping your energy to last longer.

Swap highly processed foods, for meals that offer a wider variety of nutrients. These Fried Fish Tacos with cream cheese and feta are easy, tasty and seriously satisfying. Find recipe on: <https://www.rediscoverdairy.co.za/recipe/fried-fish-tacos/>



For example:

- Protein from milk, yoghurt, maas, cheese, eggs, legumes and lean meats
- Healthy fats from nuts, seeds and avocados
- Fibre-rich, slow-release carbs such as fruit, vegetables, legumes and whole grains

Dairy's important role in sustained energy

Milk, yoghurt, maas and cheese naturally provide the nutrients that help keep energy levels stable.

Maretha explains, "The high-quality protein in dairy, which is so important to building and repairing your body, also slows digestion and helps you feel full. The carbohydrates in dairy have a low Glycaemic index (GI), while dairy's unique spectrum of vitamins and minerals such as magnesium and calcium support energy metabolism. This means that dairy foods help slow down



Pear & berry frozen yoghurt bars – delicious frozen, fruity, with a crunchy crumble topping. A treat to add to your active lifestyle. <https://www.rediscoverdairy.co.za/recipe/pear-berry-frozen-yoghurt-bars/>



the release of energy into your bloodstream and keeps it steady for longer.

Dairy products are excellent grab-and-go snacks such as flavoured milk, smaller portions of milk and maas (500 ml) and yoghurt and drinking yoghurt and can be enjoyed on the run.

Easy dairy-based snack ideas to keep you going include:

- Yoghurt Breakfast Bowl – plain yoghurt with sliced apple, unsweetened granola/rolled oats and cinnamon
- Avo and cottage cheese on a slice of low GI wholegrain bread with chilli crisp
- Chocolate and banana milk – a glass of milk blended with cocoa, some rolled oats, banana and a spoonful of nut butter
- Pineapple and spinach smoothie made with maas (or yoghurt), frozen pineapple, baby spinach leaves, chia seeds and a dash of honey

Maretha adds, "The idea is to combine a dairy food with fibre-rich and/or some healthy fats to make a smart snack that gives you sustained energy."

Avoiding the day's energy highs and lows

Sugary snacks and drinks, as well as refined, processed carbs cause a rapid spike in your blood sugar. This is significant concern for people who are diabetic or pre-diabetic, but it's not actually good for anyone if it's

a regular habit. Do your best to avoid foods and drinks with sugar listed as one of the first three ingredients on the label.

Remember that sugar as an ingredient goes by many names including dextrose, corn syrup, sucrose, maltodextrin and fructose. Maretha says, "Sweets, chocolates, fizzy drinks and refined baked goods may give you a short-term energy boost and an overload of simple sugars. They often leave you feeling more tired and hungry later."

“The rollercoaster of energy highs and low throughout the day impacts not just on your body, but your mental performance and emotional well-being. When it comes to energy, slow and steady truly wins the day.”



For dairy ideas and recipes, join the Rediscover Dairy Facebook page: www.facebook.com/RediscoverDAIRY

An Initiative of the Consumer Education Project of Milk SA



<https://cheesesa.co.za/>



This shift has transformed milk from a basic commodity into a diversified category catering to different income groups, lifestyles and health priorities. According to Persistence Market Research, demand for value-added dairy products is growing faster than standard milk as consumers increasingly seek more functionality from everyday purchases.

Plant-based products are also becoming increasingly visible within mainstream retail.

According to Eugene Ferreira, Account Manager at Giraf, shoppers are no longer choosing products purely based on dietary requirements.

“Shoppers are no longer only choosing products based on dietary requirements; they are also looking for variety, quality, taste, sustainability and a more premium experience,” he explains. “Plant-based milk has moved from being a niche or specialty product to becoming part of the mainstream dairy conversation.”

Ferreira says this shift has encouraged brands to focus on products that combine functionality with enjoyment.

“Consumers want products that feel better aligned with their lifestyles, but they also want something that tastes good and fits naturally into their daily routines.”

Balancing quality and affordability

One of the dairy sector’s biggest challenges is maintaining affordability while protecting product quality.

<https://stockcake.com/i/milk-pouring-ritual>



Input costs across the value chain continue to rise, including feed and farming costs, fuel and logistics, imported packaging materials, energy and labour. At the same time, consumers remain unwilling to compromise on freshness, nutritional integrity, shelf life and food safety.

Maccaferri believes quality cannot become negotiable within the category.

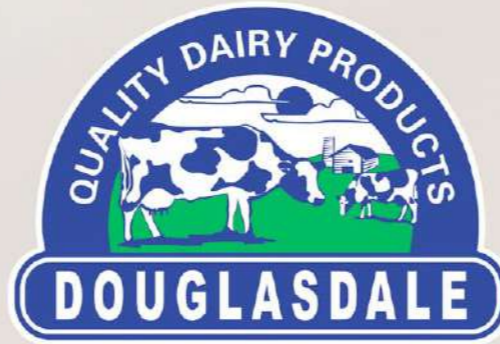
“Quality is the foundation of trust in dairy, and it cannot be compromised at any price point,” she explains. “The focus is therefore not on balancing quality versus affordability, but on driving efficiency across the entire value chain to deliver both.”

She points to long-term farmer partnerships, rigorous quality standards and operational efficiencies as critical factors in maintaining accessible pricing without sacrificing standards.

Retailers are also increasingly relying on private label and value-tier products to protect affordability, while premium and functional products continue to drive margin growth.

Ferreira says premium positioning within dairy alternatives requires careful balance. “Giraf Macadamia Milk is positioned as a premium product, but we balance this by being intentional about where we create value and where we control costs,” he says. “The aim is not to be the cheapest option, but to offer a product that feels worth it – something consumers can trust and enjoy without compromising on quality.”

This dynamic is reshaping the modern dairy aisle, creating space for both value-driven essentials and premium innovation.



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WHY REAL MILK MATTERS



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to the farmers, our cows, our team and our customers - you make it all possible. Here's to many more years of real milk and real connections.

Happy World Milk Day!



Where growth is happening

While fresh milk remains central to the category, long-life and value-added dairy products continue gaining momentum.

Growth areas include ...

- UHT milk
- Lactose-free milk
- Flavoured milk
- Fortified dairy beverages
- High-protein dairy products

South Africa's UHT milk segment continues to benefit from convenience, extended shelf life and storage flexibility. Whole milk still dominates overall dairy consumption, although shopper preferences are steadily diversifying.

Several key trends are driving shelf performance ...

- Convenience-led purchasing
- Functional nutrition
- Health and wellness awareness
- Reduced food waste
- Urbanisation and fast-paced lifestyles

Maccaferri says core milk formats continue to dominate overall category performance.

"Core milk formats remain the backbone of the category, with both UHT and fresh milk performing strongly, particularly full cream, which continues to be preferred for its taste and nutritional profile," she says.

According to Maccaferri, UHT sales are largely driven by one-litre packs and multipacks because of their value and shelf-life advantages, while fresh

www.australian-macadamias.org/



milk continues performing well in larger family-oriented formats.

Value-added products, however, serve different consumption occasions.

"Flavoured milk, primarily chocolate and strawberry, dominates this segment and is typically offered in smaller, single-serve formats," she explains. "These formats are closely linked to usage occasions such as on-the-go consumption or lunchbox inclusion."

Plant-based alternatives are also seeing stronger shelf presence.

Ferreira says Giraf's best-selling product reflects changing shopper priorities. He says ...

“Our Unsweetened Macadamia Milk is currently our best seller, which clearly reflects a shift towards cleaner, more natural products with less sugar and fewer unnecessary additives.”

At the same time, indulgence still matters ...

“Consumers want both everyday clean-label options as well as premium products that offer enjoyment.”

What these trends reveal about SA shoppers

The evolution of milk purchasing behaviour reflects several broader retail trends.

Price remains important, but shoppers are increasingly evaluating nutritional value, shelf life, convenience and overall product versatility before making purchasing decisions.

Trust and transparency are also becoming stronger purchase drivers. Consumers want greater confidence in ingredient quality, sourcing standards, food safety and nutritional claims.

SPICY RUSSIAN OR FRANKFURTER WHITE BEAN & KALE STEW

A HEARTY WINTER MEAL.



INGREDIENTS:

- 2 Tbsp (15ml) olive oil
- 5 Russian sausages or Frankfurters sliced
- 1 onion, diced
- Salt & pepper
- 3 celery stalks, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 Tbsp (15ml) smoked paprika
- 1 can (400g) butter beans
- 2 cups (500ml) chicken stock
- 3 potatoes, largely diced
- 3 carrots, sliced
- 200g kale
- To serve, Parmesan

METHOD:

Heat the oil in a large pot, then add the sliced sausage and cook until browned all over. Remove the sausages.

Add onion and celery to the pot with a pinch of salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until onions soften, about 4 - 8 minutes.

Stir in garlic and paprika and cook for a minute. Add beans to the pot, using a masher or the back of a wooden spoon, and mash half the beans; it will thicken the stew.

Add stock, potatoes, and carrots, and cook, covered, for 20 minutes, until the potatoes have softened. Just before serving, add kale to wilt.

Garnish with Parmesan.

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Younger shoppers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z consumers, are reshaping the category through ...

- Health-focused purchasing
- Sustainability awareness
- Interest in alternative dairy formats
- Digital-driven product discovery

Ferreira believes consumers are becoming more flexible in how they approach the category.

“Many consumers are not necessarily choosing one side forever.” He says ...

“They are choosing different products for different occasions. Milk is no longer limited to tea, coffee or cereal; consumers are using it in smoothies, baking, sauces, iced drinks and premium coffee routines at home.”

For retailers, this creates opportunities for more segmented and insight-driven merchandising strategies.

Milk’s nutritional role remains strong

Despite growing category diversification, milk continues to hold a strong nutritional position.

Milk naturally contains calcium, protein, Vitamin D, Vitamin B12, potassium and phosphorus. For children, dairy products support bone development, muscle growth and overall nutritional intake. For adults, milk contributes to bone health, energy production and muscle maintenance.

Protein-rich and fortified dairy products are also gaining traction among health-conscious consumers seeking additional wellness benefits.



Ice Cream maker’s stall, Sydney Markets, c. 1910. By Rex Hazlewood, vintage glass negative, State Library of NSW

Ice cream’s history stretches back centuries, with origins in ancient China and Greece. Early forms of frozen treats, like snow and fruit mixtures in China, and sherbet in Europe, gradually evolved into the ice cream we know today. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of ice cream parlours in the 19th and 20th centuries marked a significant period of growth and accessibility for this beloved treat.

Maccaferri believes milk’s nutritional relevance remains firmly intact.

“Milk remains one of the most nutrient-dense, naturally balanced foods available,” she says. “Its versatility and accessibility make it a consistent and reliable part of a healthy diet.”

Plant-based alternatives are also positioning themselves within the broader wellness conversation.

“Giraf Macadamia Milk is naturally dairy-free, gluten-free, seed oil free and low in carbohydrates, while also being rich in Omega 3, 6 and 7,” Ferreira explains. “It offers consumers a premium dairy alternative that still feels smooth, versatile and enjoyable.”

Communicating value more effectively

Although dairy products offer significant nutritional benefits, many retailers still underutilise opportunities to educate shoppers within the category.

Clearer communication can improve shopper engagement and support purchasing decisions through ...

- Simpler nutritional messaging
- Educational point-of-sale material
- Functional benefit callouts
- Improved category segmentation



DSA Lab Services

An independent scientific laboratory promoting research and legal compliance within the South African dairy industry.

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For more information about food safety management systems and compliance, contact the Dairy Standard Agency on 012 665 4250 or send an email to info@dairystandard.co.za.

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Dairy quality and safety lead the way

By Christal-Lize Muller



The Dairy Standard Agency (DSA) is committed to its primary objective of serving as a self-regulatory body of the organised dairy industry. Its strategic focus is on promoting compliance with milk and dairy product composition requirements, food safety legislation, and metrology standards.

According to Jompie Burger, general manager of the DSA, the organisation was established through a collaborative effort by industry groups, many of which are still members today. These include the South African Milk Processors' Organisation (Sampro), Milk Producers' Organisation (MPO), South African National Consumer Union (Sancu), and the South African Society of Dairy Technology (SASDT).

At a glance

The DSA promotes the quality and safety of milk and dairy products through well-defined objectives, strategic planning, and scientifically grounded processes. Its primary activity is monitoring dairy products to ensure they meet legal standards.

The organisation oversees adherence to regulatory requirements and promotes stakeholder communication. Its activities include food safety audits (good manufacturing practices) at dairy processing facilities and comprehensive good agricultural practice (GAP) audits at farm level. In addition, the DSA provides the industry with scientific information.

As a registered, non-profit and independent entity, the DSA's work is guided by scientific, legal, and technical expertise across the entire dairy value chain. This includes good agricultural practices, animal welfare, raw milk quality, processing, manufacturing, packaging and labelling, as well as distribution and retail.

Advanced technologies, including DSA Lab Services, are used for managing quality, food safety and metrology risks, along with risk assessment and mitigation. The science underpinning dairy quality is dynamic and central to the sector's sustainability, requiring ongoing stakeholder engagement.

The DSA initially focussed on monitoring fresh milk at retail level to ensure compliance. This led to a comprehensive programme in collaboration with health authorities. Over time, the scope expanded to include a wider range of dairy products. The DSA currently employs proactive and reactive strategies, assuming greater responsibility across areas such as product composition, food safety, animal health, processing, storage, and distribution. Its growing role has earned recognition from government, industry, and other stakeholders.

Governance framework

The DSA is governed by an independent board with no commercial interests in the dairy industry. Board members are appointed in


accordance with the qualification requirements set out in the *Companies Act, 2008 (Act 71 of 2008)*. The board comprises eight members, including four directors. It employs 12 staff members and engages two external contractors for project work. Given its size, certain roles are combined and managed through well-defined work structures, while non-core functions such as finance are outsourced.

A technical committee of scientists provides expert guidance on milk production, animal health, processing, and product specifications. In addition, the DSA has implemented an enterprise risk management programme to ensure that all its activities remain aligned with the objectives of Milk SA.

Projects and priorities

DSA projects are prioritised at two levels and aligned with the audit committee's annual risk analysis. Both statutory and non-statutory activities are included in these priorities. The organisation currently oversees 18 projects, most of which are funded by Milk SA.

Statutory projects include national monitoring through sampling, testing, risk analysis, and reporting; technical support and corrective action in response to quality concerns; special investigations into food safety and quality risks (also referral of non-compliance for follow-up); identification and analysis of national and international risks followed by reporting of findings; programmes relating to awareness of legal non-compliance and corrective actions; ongoing liaison between DSA, government, and industry to resolve non-compliance and related challenges; collaboration with statutory bodies on legislation and industry reporting via Milk SA; annual dairy technical information programmes, food safety training sessions, and support for Milk SA's transformation objectives; media liaison and consumer communication regarding DSA activities and the importance of dairy standards; development of technical guidelines in conjunction with industry to promote legal compliance and corrective measures.

Non-statutory projects are funded through the 'user pay' model and other organisations, and include sustainable monitoring of milk and dairy products under service level agreements; annual safety audits at dairies on behalf of milk buyers; food safety and animal welfare audits requested by producers, processors, or retailers; consultations and advice regarding legal requirements for food safety and product composition; a collaboration platform between DSA and input suppliers known as the Dairy Quality Club; user-paid training in food safety systems, internal auditing and laboratory practices; provision of reference standards and microbiological, product composition, diagnostic, and metrological tests through DSA Lab Services; and brucellosis monitoring using early detection tests which also support veterinary research into new testing methods. 

For more information, contact Jompie Burger at jompie@dairystandard.co.za or visit www.dairystandard.co.za



Cross-category merchandising also presents opportunities to increase usage occasions by positioning dairy products alongside breakfast cereals, coffee, tea and wellness products.

Digital engagement is another growing opportunity through QR codes, wellness campaigns, recipe-driven marketing and social media content.

Ferreira believes education remains especially important within the plant-based segment.

“One common misconception is that plant-based milk is only for vegans or people with allergies,” he explains. “In reality, many consumers choose it because they enjoy the taste, texture and lifestyle benefits.”

He says sampling and in-store activations remain powerful conversion tools. “Once consumers taste the product and experience the creamy texture, it becomes much easier to convert interest into repeat purchase.”

Packaging innovation and sustainability

Packaging innovation is becoming increasingly important within dairy as consumers demand greater convenience, sustainability and product protection. Advances in UHT processing and aseptic packaging have significantly extended shelf life while reducing spoilage and improving distribution flexibility.

Benefits include ...

- Reduced waste
- Better supply chain efficiency
- Improved accessibility
- Greater convenience



Bicycle-based ice cream street vendor in Indonesia.
Jonathan McIntosh,
<https://en.wikipedi>

Packaging innovation is also supporting changing household dynamics through ...

- Single-serve formats
- Resealable packaging
- Portion-controlled products
- On-the-go convenience

Sustainability expectations are also rising, with consumers placing increased pressure on brands to reduce environmental impact through recyclable materials, reduced plastic usage and more sustainable sourcing initiatives.

Packaging is no longer viewed purely as functional. It has become part of the broader brand, trust and sustainability conversation.

Addressing common misconceptions

Despite milk's nutritional value, misconceptions continue shaping shopper perceptions across both dairy and plant-based categories.

One common misconception is that all dairy products are unhealthy or excessively fattening. In reality, milk can form part of a balanced diet when consumed appropriately.

Confusion also remains around lactose intolerance, despite the growing availability of lactose-free dairy products.

At the same time, shoppers often misunderstand the nutritional differences between dairy milk and plant-based alternatives. While plant-based

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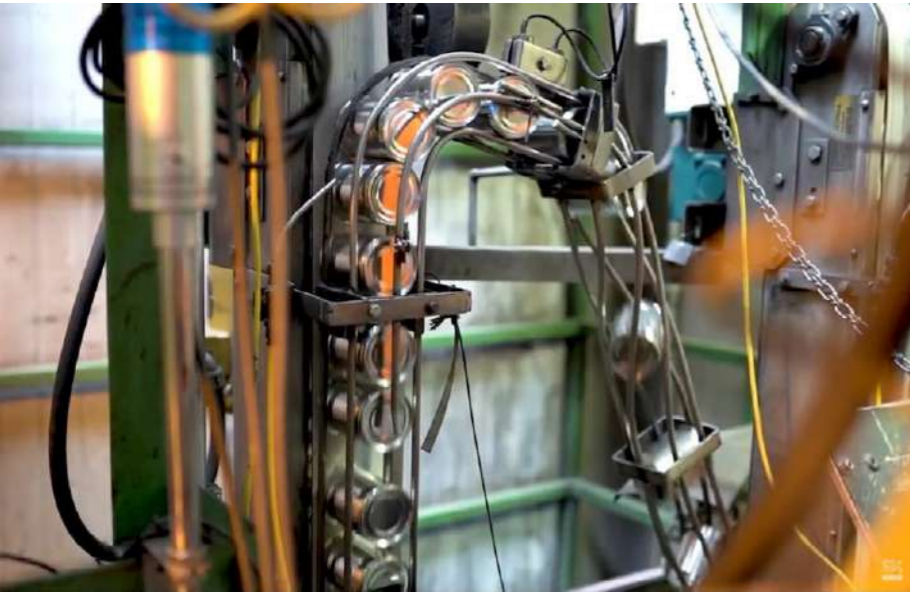


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beverages provide variety and lifestyle choice, their nutritional profiles can differ significantly unless fortified.

UHT processing also continues to face unnecessary scepticism, despite being designed to preserve product safety and extend shelf life while maintaining nutritional value.

Ferreira says misconceptions around plant-based products remain widespread.

“Another misconception is that all plant-based milks taste the same or perform the same,” he says. “Macadamia milk is different because it is naturally rich in healthy fats, texture and smooth flavour, which makes it especially strong in coffee and other everyday uses.”

He believes education and visibility will remain critical to category growth.

“Greater adoption will come from visibility, education and trial. Over the next 12 to 24 months, we see macadamia milk becoming less about ‘dairy versus non-dairy’ and more about taste, quality and lifestyle choice.”



Nestlé are collaborating with farmers around the world to see how small changes to used methods can bring about big changes for sustainable farming.

www.nestle.com/sustainability/

The future of the dairy aisle

As World Milk Day approaches, one thing is clear: milk in South Africa is no longer a static commodity category. It has become a dynamic retail space shaped by affordability, nutrition, functionality, convenience and evolving consumer expectations.

For retailers and suppliers, the challenge lies in balancing accessibility with innovation while responding to growing demand for healthier, more convenient and more sustainable products.

The future of the dairy aisle will not be defined by a single type of consumer or product format.

Growth will come from delivering a broader, insight-led range that reflects the realities of modern South African shopping behaviour. Retailers investing in smarter category segmentation, education-led merchandising, packaging innovation, functional wellness positioning and value-driven product strategies will be better positioned to unlock long-term growth within one of FMCG’s most resilient and evolving categories. **SR**

Sources:

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