

BUSINESS

Perspective: Do the math on what fraction of a 12-year-old's life has now been spent under the stress of Covid, and the number is just so saddening. Fortunately, writes Lisa McGinley, there is consensus in Hartford that emotional and behavioral health must be a top priority. **B3**

Local business, in brief **Page B2**

What happened to the chocolate milk?

In rural Maine, a supply chain mystery. **Page B2**



A single serving of chocolate milk, photographed on the production floor of Houlton Farms Dairy in Houlton, Maine.

PHOTO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST BY TRISTAN SPINSKI

SNOOP DOGG BUYS DEATH ROW RECORDS

Hip Hop icon Snoop Dogg has acquired the Death Row Records brand from MNRK Music Group, a song publishing and recording company backed by private equity firm Blackstone Inc. The deal is expected to include Death Row's entire music catalog, said a person familiar with the transaction. Financial terms weren't disclosed.

Started in the early 1990s, Death Row was home to several important West Coast hip hop artists, including Tupac Shakur, Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, Shad "Lil Bow Wow" Moss, Nate Dogg and Snoop Dogg. The label went bankrupt in 2006 and was later acquired by an entity called Entertainment One, which toymaker Hasbro Inc. bought in 2019. Blackstone snapped up the label last year via its

\$385 million purchase of Entertainment One's music business.

Music catalog deals have heated in the past year as mega-stars have looked to cash in on their talent. Last month, HarbourView Equity Partners acquired the music catalog of "Despacito" singer Luis Fonsi. Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen have signed jumbo deals for their catalogs too. Snoop Dogg appears to be banking on the longevity of the early recordings by Death Row Records.

— Bloomberg



Snoop Dogg

Chicken wing crunch prompts Super Bowl Sunday blitz

A crunch on chicken wings ahead of today's Super Bowl has the finger food favorite near all-time high prices for the time of year. Americans are projected to eat massive amounts of the game day snack, about 1.42 billion wings. That's tied with last year for a record. But this year, there are signs that getting those volumes to consumers is harder and supplies are tighter. Add to that the turmoil that has been dogging U.S. food supply chains.

Restaurants have been scrambling. Some may switch to frozen wings in case they run out of fresh. Others are reducing the number of wings that come in an order. In a sign of the times, companies like the one that owns Chili's are booking their chicken orders into the summer and beyond to lay claim to whatever's available.

As Tom Super, spokesman for the National Chicken Council, likes to point out: chickens unfortunately only have two wings.

— Bloomberg



An order of chicken wings

ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG

Supply-chain woes hit Maine dairy producer

By JOANNA SLATER
The Washington Post

LIKE MANY Americans, Tracey Albert has grown accustomed to shortages at supermarkets over the past two years — toilet paper, cat food, potato chips, ramen noodles.

Then the pandemic came for her chocolate milk.

Albert, 38, has been drinking the chocolate milk made by Houlton Farms Dairy in northern Maine since she was in elementary school. Now she buys it for her own children. “Nothing holds a candle to it,” she said.

But when Albert went to the supermarket late last year, the shelf where she finds her weekly one-gallon jug was empty, the latest casualty of a supply chain warped by two years of a global pandemic.

There was no problem with the cows. A farm near the town of Houlton in Aroostook County, pressed up against the Canadian border, continued to supply fresh milk seven days a week, just as it had for as long as anyone could remember.

The issue was a custom-made chocolate powder, normally delivered four times a year from a factory in Illinois. When Eric Lincoln, the co-owner of the dairy, spoke to his supplier in December, he learned it might take 12 weeks — triple the normal time — to receive the crucial ingredient. That’s when Lincoln knew he’d have to curtail production.

The story of the disappearing chocolate milk is a microcosm of a much larger struggle. Businesses are grappling with historic transportation delays and shifts in behavior as Americans buy more goods than they did before the pandemic. That has produced abrupt and sometimes baffling shortages affecting anything from baby formula to semiconductors, while also spurring rising prices.

After two years of adapting and improvising, companies understand there are no quick fixes. What’s more, no one really knows when the disruptions will end.

“We have a mess in shipping that’s going to take awhile to unwind, even if we get back to normal behavior,” said Phil Levy, a former member of the Council of Economic Advisers who is now chief economist at Flexport, a freight forwarder. According to a Flexport measure, it currently takes goods 110 days to make their way from factories in Asia through ports in the United States — four days short of the record high. Levy believes that the supply chain disruptions won’t abate before 2023.

That means more scrambling for small businesses like Houlton Farms, which was founded in 1938. Lincoln has spent his entire working life at the dairy, starting with a part-time job when he was a high school student. In 1981, he bought the business with his parents and brother. Now he’s 63.

He talks about the dairy’s recent supply-chain disruption with a weary stoicism.

“You hear everybody is having trouble,” Lincoln said. “It’s just our turn to have our turn.”

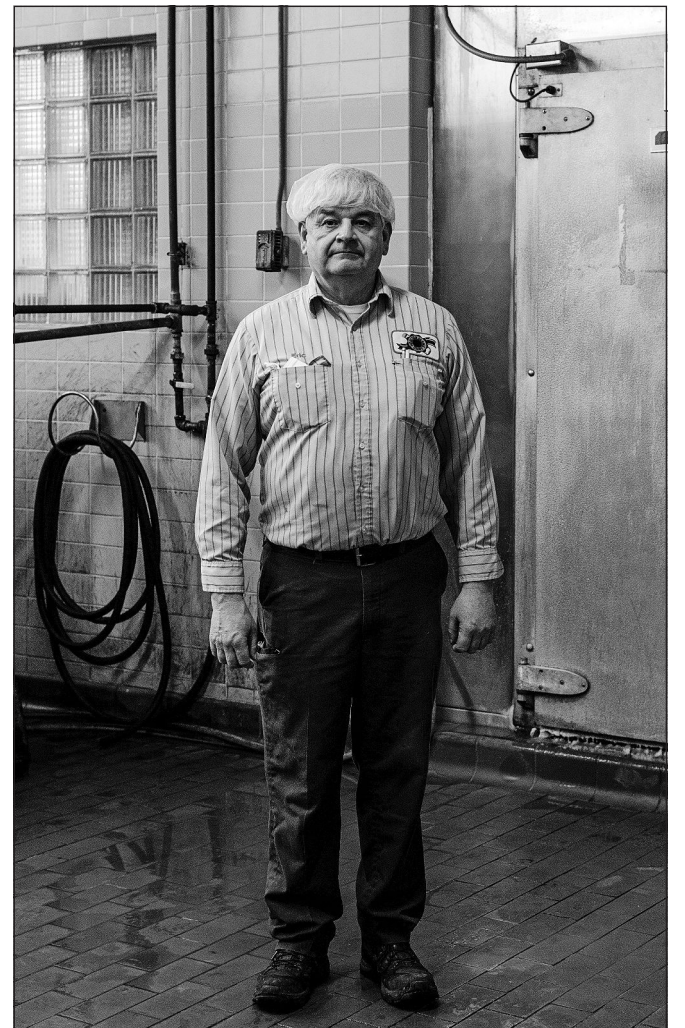
It’s not the first time Houlton Farms has faced shortages during the pandemic. In the warm weather, the dairy runs three ice-cream shops. Last year, Lincoln discovered that pineapple topping was



Steve Wiggins, above left, has worked at Houlton Farms Dairy in Houlton, Maine, for 45 years. Above right, co-owner Eric Lincoln on the production floor at the dairy. “You hear everybody is having trouble,” he says. “It’s just our turn to have our turn.” Below, milk cans sit on racks.

The story of the disappearing chocolate milk is a microcosm of a much larger struggle.

Photos for The Washington Post by TRISTAN SPINSKI



suddenly difficult to find. So too were vanilla syrup, banana syrup and paper containers.

Then came the egg nog debacle. The dairy’s longtime supplier in Maine announced in July that it would no longer make the product due to supply issues of its own. Lincoln raced to find a replacement and ordered one from California.

Customers noticed the difference and weren’t happy. “I almost wish I never bought it,” Lincoln said. “That was a good lesson not to mess with the chocolate milk.”

A 40-year-old formula

Every three months, a pallet of 40 bags of chocolate milk powder normally arrives at the Houlton Farms production facility. The formula has remained unchanged for four decades.

In the early 1980s, a representative of a company called Bowey Krimko told the Lincolns that he would create a superior chocolate milk powder for them, one that would produce just the right shade of brown and the right amount of creaminess.

Houlton Farms continued to order the same, customized mix year in and year out, long after Bowey Krimko disappeared in a series of acquisitions. Now Lincoln buys the powder from an arm of Tate & Lyle, a global food and beverage conglomerate headquartered in London.

Darrin Peterson is an executive with Tate & Lyle based in Illinois who oversees the company’s global stabilizers and functional systems business. Functional systems are the mixes used by food manufacturers to make everything from chocolate milk to salad dressings, soups to ice creams. They provide not just flavor but also a particular feel, with ingredients to prevent separating, clumping and melting.

Peterson said that while the Houlton Farms mix is unique — Tate & Lyle doesn’t make that particular product for any other customer — its challenges are not. “Anyone in the food



industry today, whether you’re a small processor like Houlton or a large one like Kraft Foods, everybody is feeling the same kinds of pinches in their supply chains,” Peterson said. “It’s unavoidable.”

IRI, a market research firm, tracks grocery shortages in the United States. According to its data, 88% of consumer goods were in stock across the country last week, but there were considerable variations by region and product. Among the items in shorter supply: energy drinks, frozen baked goods, refrigerated dough and pest control products.

Peterson said the delay in getting Houlton Farms its chocolate powder — a mix of cocoa, a stabilizer called carrageenan and several other ingredients — was caused by a tangle of factors, not a shortage of one particular item. All of Tate & Lyle’s

imported raw materials are being impacted by continuing logjams at ports, he said, where wait times remain far longer than they were before the pandemic.

Worker shortages have also played a role. The company’s facility in Sycamore, Ill., usually employs about 120 people, including in a dedicated cocoa room. Peterson estimates that the labor pool is down about 10%: employees who quit aren’t easily replaced while others have been out sick as coronavirus infections soared. For the first time in more than a decade, the company began actively recruiting from the local high school.

At the same time, demand for certain products has come roaring back. When schools across the nation reopened in September, for instance, orders for chocolate milk mixes — which Tate & Lyle calls

“chocolate dairy powders,” or CDPs — surged. “You have everybody in the marketplace looking for these raw materials from all points,” Peterson said.

To supply customers like Houlton Farms, Tate & Lyle used to import cocoa powder from places like West Africa and Brazil. Now the company is shifting its sourcing strategy to buy cocoa from domestic distributors in the United States to try to speed up delivery times. Meanwhile, the team tasked with finding the fastest ways into the country for raw materials — by varying ports or suppliers — has dialed its efforts “up to 11,” Peterson said.

“I don’t want to say [it] has been a nightmare,” he said. But he has never seen a supply chain like the one that exists today. Two of the company’s containers were stuck on a ship that blocked the Suez Canal last year; several suppliers of emulsifiers, another key ingredient in food mixes, have invoked legal clauses that allow them to break contracts due to forces beyond their control. “We’re all living in unprecedented times,” Peterson said.

More complications ahead

In Houlton, a town of about 6,000 people in the northeast corner of Maine, word of the chocolate milk shortage traveled quickly.

Lincoln decided to use whatever supplies he had to continue providing small chocolate milks to local schools, where generations of kids have grown up drinking the dairy’s products. That left only a trickle for retail stores. Lincoln wrote an apologetic post on Facebook saying the company expected to be out of the product until March.

At County Yankee Grocer, a local supermarket, some customers reacted by stockpiling whatever Houlton Farms chocolate milk they could find, including a few who bought 12 half-gallons at once, said Joshua Brisley, the store manager. At the dairy’s request, Brisley said, he instituted a limit of one chocolate milk per

customer.

Brisley, 44, ticks off the other products the supermarket has run short of in recent weeks: Saltine crackers, Campbell soups, Prego spaghetti sauce. His shelves of fruit snacks for kids are currently empty. He hears cereal might become an issue soon. “There’s no predictability to it,” he said.

At the end of last month, Lincoln received some welcome news. Tate & Lyle sent an email to the dairy saying that it was aiming to deliver the chocolate milk mix earlier than expected and Lincoln hopes the order will come this week. Once the powder is delivered, it will be combined in a tank with 2% milk, cane sugar and small amounts of vitamin A and vitamin D. Then the mixture is pasteurized and packaged. The whole process takes about an hour and a half, Lincoln said.

Still, he is bracing himself for more complications ahead. One supplier told him that a stabilizer the dairy uses to make ice cream could become hard to find, so Lincoln ordered more in preparation for summer. He heard the same thing about raspberry extract and citric acid, key ingredients in sherbet. He is keeping an extra inventory of rubber gaskets for his milk pipes: it used to take a week to get a new one but now it takes more than two months.

“It’s just a lot of things that you never used to think about, now you have to think about,” Lincoln said.

One of the customers lucky enough to find the chocolate milk at County Yankee in early January was Albert, the Houlton native and mother of four. She could only purchase one and it felt like “buying contraband,” Albert said with a laugh.

“My 4-year-old and 8-year-old absolutely love it and I do too,” she said, before admitting that she is lactose intolerant. Even that doesn’t keep her from drinking the chocolate milk. “It’s worth it,” she said.

BUSINESS BRIEFS

PEOPLE

Erica Lindberg Gourd, of Stonington, has joined **Judi Caracausa and the Market Realty, LLC team** in Mystic. She can be reached at (860) 460-2465 (mobile) and (860) 572-1155 (office). Prior to joining Market Realty, she had a marketing and sales background having run her own branding company in New York and Connecticut for the past three decades.

New London-based attorney **Joseph Meaney**, and colleagues **John Murphy** and **Kyle Pavlick**, formerly of Cranmore, Fitzgerald & Meaney, LLC, have joined **Halloran SAGE**, which has offices in New

London, Hartford, Danbury, Middletown, and New Haven, as well as Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. The three attorneys join with the firm’s nearly 80 lawyers.

Nancy A. Thomas of Oakdale was recently elected to join the Norwich Arts Center’s Board of Directors for a two-year term. She is an MIS/Finance Director for Atlantic Broadband. She has worked in financial operations for over 35 years. For more information about volunteer opportunities, visit www.norwicharts.org/be-a-volunteer.

WORKSHOPS
SCORE will host:

“How to Start & Run a Successful Non-Profit,” SCORE counselor **Bob Potter**, Wednesday, Feb. 16, 10-11:30 a.m., Zoom.

“Managing Your Business Finances with QuickBooks,” with Intuit ProAdviser **Elizabeth Santaus**, Tuesday, March 1, 2-3:30 p.m., Zoom.

“Choosing the Right QuickBooks: The Basics of Setting Up Your QuickBooks Company,” with **Elizabeth Santaus**, Tuesday, March 8, 2-3:30 p.m., Zoom.

For more information, contact Anne Driscoll at anne.driscoll@scorevolunteer.org.

NETWORKING
The Chamber of Commerce

of Eastern Connecticut and the **Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce** will host a Business After Hours at the newly opened **DraftKings** sports betting bar at **Foxwoods Resort Casino** on March 2. Register at www.ChamberECT.com/events or (860)701-9113.

Dr. Raja Mangipudy, senior vice president, global head of Drug Safety Research and Development, Groton Site Director at **Pfizer**, will provide an overview March 9 and update Pfizer’s latest work on the COVID-19 vaccine and therapies. Register at www.ChamberECT.com/events or (860) 701-9113.

The **Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut** will host the **11th Annual Military Appreciation Breakfast** on March 25. Sponsored by Electric Boat. Register at www.ChamberECT.com/events or (860) 701-9113.

GIVING

Jewett City Savings Bank Foundation will be matching donations up to \$3,000 to help bring the MLK39 Mural Tour to Putnam. The goal of the state-wide tour, which is organized by RiseUP for Arts, is to bring 39 large-scale murals to communities across Connecticut, each representing one year in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The matching grants from the foundation will help organizers meet their final goal of \$15,000, which will be used to create a mural to be located at the Hale Family YMCA in Putnam. For more information or to make a donation, visit www.gofundme.com/f/putnams-mlk39-diversity-and-equity-mural or www.ctmurals.com/mlk39.

MEMBERSHIP

The **Chamber of Commerce of Eastern CT** welcomes its newest member: **Little Pub**.

Send your business news to businessbriefs@theday.com.