

Article published Apr 7, 2008

Artisan Cheese Adds To Diversification Of Agricultural Receipts

Cheese production occupies an ever-growing portion of Vermont's economy. The 35 members of the Vermont Cheese Council dot the state, from the Northeast Kingdom's Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro to Maplebrook Farm in Bennington, from Lakes End Cheese in Alburg to Vermont Shepherd in Putney. Cheese enthusiasts, or tyrophiles, may find a variety of cheese makers awaiting them, whether they enter Vermont from Canada on I-89, New York City on I-91, New Hampshire on I-89 westbound, or New York state on Route 7. Altogether, they produce more than 150 varieties of cheese.

The growth in cheese production has been sudden, says Kelly Loftus, spokesperson for the Vermont Department of Agriculture. In 1995, there were only six farms making cheese on-site. Today, there are 290 farms in the cheese business, working with a cheese-making co-operative and Vermont's cheese industry, which brings the state about \$15 million a year.

Last August, the American Cheese Society recognized Vermont's burgeoning cheese industry, holding its annual five-day conference in Burlington. Attendees shuttled from the Sheraton Hotel and Convention Center to Shelburne Farms to sample cheeses as well as beef, chocolate, and other agricultural products. The Boston Globe carried a series of articles about the event, describing it as "Cheesemakers in Paradise" and referring to a number of Vermont-based artisan cheese producers.

There's a sound business reason that farmers in Vermont, and other states, have elected to turn milk into cheese. Catherine Donnelly, University of Vermont food microbiologist and co-director of the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese, has been known to use the example of a farmer with a herd of 65 cows. She says that "he sold 15 cows and began a cheese-making operation. He soon had enough money to build the barn [that he wanted] Or, in dollars and cents, the milk of 50 cows would have brought him about \$100,000, but, made into cheese, it's worth \$1 million."

Of the 200 cheesemakers who participated in the competition, 28 are Vermont firms. The Vermont entrants received 41 awards in the prestigious competition that pitted 1,208 entries against each other. In all, the Vermont contingent took home 10 first-place, 19 second-place, and 12 third-place ribbons, including 10 first-place, 19 second-place and 12 third-place ribbons. The top Green Mountain State winner was Cabot Creamery of Montpelier, receiving 11 prizes including four firsts, four seconds, and three thirds. Vermont Butter & Cheese of Websterville was the second-highest top winner with a total of seven ribbons. Other Vermont cheesemakers taking home one of the three top awards in their category are Bonnieview Farm of Craftsbury Common; Champlain Valley Creamery of Vergennes; Crowley Cheese of Mount Holly; Franklin Foods of Enosburg Falls; Grafton Village Cheese Company of Grafton; Jasper Hill Farm of Greensboro; Maplebrook Farm of Mount Holly; Neighborly Farms of Vermont of Randolph Center; Saputo Cheese USA Inc., of Hinesburg; Shelburne Farms of Shelburne; Thistle Hill Farm of North Pomfret; Twig Farm of West Cornwall; Vermont Shepherd of Putney; Willow Hill Farm of Milton; Woodcock Farm of Weston; and the Woodstock Water Buffalo Company of South Woodstock.

Back in the days when nearly every Vermont farm had a small herd of about a dozen cows, farmers made their own butter and cheese. Over time, farmers began bringing their milk to cheese co-ops that turned the easily spoiled fresh milk into cheese, which was much easier to store and ship. A few of those old cheese co-ops still exist, including Crowley Cheese, Grafton Cheese, and Cabot Creamery, all award winners.

Cheese making has traveled a circular path back to the kitchen, with the growing production of farmstead cheeses (made by hand on the farm where the milk is produced) and artisan cheese (also handmade but made of milk brought from other farms). They make cheese from more than cows' milk, but also from the milk of goats and sheep. Until recently, Vermont also supported perhaps the only U.S. cheese-making facility that made both mozzarella cheese and yogurt from water buffalo milk.

The Vermont Cheese Council, formed in 1997, celebrates the variety of Vermont cheeses along its Cheese Trail. Those entering Vermont from the southwest on Route 30 may stop at Consider Bardwell Farm in West Pawlet, and step into Vermont cheese history as they do so. It is the site of the first cheese making cooperative in the state, founded in 1864 and lasting to 1932. Its wheels of cows' milk cheddar rode the adjacent Dayton-Hudson Railroad to Albany, Boston, and further destinations.

Today, Oberhasli goats, about 50 of them, share their converted cow barn with a milking parlor, cheese making facility, and cheese-aging (affinage) rooms. Consider Bardwell Farm, owned and run by Angela Miller and Russell Glover, produces the goats' milk cheeses Mettowee, a light chèvre; Danby, a feta; Manchester, a peasant tomme; and Experience, a tangy cave-aged Mettowee; as well as Dorset, a tomme made from Jersey milk. "We raise all our own animals," Miller says, "from soup to nuts. The farm has a number of historically significant buildings, made of rare red brick."

The book *Historical Architecture of Rutland County* describes the farmstead as "an outstanding example of 19th-century, local agricultural self-sufficiency. It includes such buildings as the cheese factory, the edge tool trip-hammer shop, a brick smokehouse, corn crib, and hog house, and a unique, plastered, masonry cheese storage structure." Miller hopes to restore the old cheese house, "burned down by the previous owner before the farm was sold."

Consider Bardwell Farm's cheese is sold at four farm markets in New York City, one in Westchester, NY, and "three up here." We sell to a lot of restaurants. We went from making 9,000 pounds in 2006, to 27,000 pounds in 2007, and hope to make 35,000 pounds in 2008."

Hildene Farm in Manchester will begin making cheese from its flock of Nubian goats in the coming year; production will take the form of small batches, primarily to demonstrate the process, says Peggy Galloup, farm manager. "We're hoping for ground breaking in late April" to build a barn for the dairy goats. Goat's milk will be used to make chèvre and feta cheese in the summer, with cow's milk made into havarti cheese when the goats are dry.

Crawford Family Farm in Whiting makes its Vermont Ayr Farmstead Cheese, modeled on northern Italian Fontina-type cheese, from the milk of Ayrshire cows, four times a week. A fourth-generation family farm, the Crawford farm relies on selecting 24 cows from its 60-cow herd to provide the milk for its cheeses. Visitors are encouraged to view the process through a window into the cheese room, and to call ahead to arrange visits and tours.

In addition to its Mountain Ayr cheese, the farm has also begun experimenting with a tangier version, called Lemon Ayr, which may or may not also incorporate additional tang by adding peppery components. The Crawford operation makes its cheeses in both natural rind and waxed versions; because waxing retains moisture, the cheese develops a more "rubbery" texture.

Another goat milk-based cheese maker producing more than one type of ripened cheese is Blue Ledge Farm of Salisbury, making a soft-ripened, blue-ash-seasoned Lakes' Edge; a velvety-textured Crottina; a raw-milk, aged La Luna; a plain or seasoned chèvre; and a raw-milk, washed-rind aged Riley's Coat. Farm owners Gregory Bernhardt and Hanna Sessions ask visitors to call ahead for visiting hours and tours.

The 36 goats at Twig Farm in West Cornwall have created their own habitat, chowing down on honey-suckle, plantain, chicory, nettles, and other plants, clearing away young trees and scrub as Emily Sunerman and Michael Lee built a farm on previously unused ground. Twig Farm turns out an aged goat's milk Tomme, a cloth-molded square cheese also made from goats' milk, and a soft wheel made from mixed goats' and cows' milk.

Dancing Cow Farm is to the west of Middlebury, while Orb Weaver Farm and Champlain Valley Creamery are to the north. The Champlain Valley Creamery resides in the landmark Kennedy Brothers Building. Owner Carleton Yoder converts milk from a certified Bridport organic dairy farm into Old Fashion Organic Cream Cheese and Champlain Triple Cream. Yoder is also in the process of developing a new cheese, “probably a farmer cheese,” made from the skim milk that is a by-product of his other cheeses.

Currently Yoder makes about 75 pounds a week of the Triple Cream out of a total of 200 to 250 pounds of cheese per week. He recently hired his first part-time employee, who helps him haul his cans of milk to the second floor of the Kennedy building. Visitors to Champlain Valley Creamery may watch “a flurry of activity or a lot of watching the grass grow,” he relates.

Cheese making had been a hobby for Yoder in his former career, that of a wine maker. His hobby developed into a business and Yoder became that rarity, the proprietor of a small dairy operation without a farm.

Books on cheese document the growing interest in cheese in Vermont and across the country. Henry Tewksbury wrote *The Cheeses of Vermont: A Gourmet Guide to Vermont’s Artisanal Cheese Makers*. Published by The Countryman Press of Woodstock in 2002, it organizes the state’s cheese makers by region and by product type, and also describes the cheese making process.

Ellen Ecker Ogden, a professional food writer and representative of the Vermont Cheese Council, documented the state’s cheesemakers, then 33 in number, in *The Vermont Cheese Book*. In her introduction, Ogden comments that “Since Tewksbury’s book was published in 2002, the state has developed an unexpectedly robust cheese industry.”

Ogden’s book discusses not only how cheese is made at the 33 farms she visited, but also includes information on how to find each site, what times of the year they actively make cheese and whether or not they welcome visitors. One way to use the book is to take a one-day driving tour of each of its six chapters: Windham and Bennington; Windsor; Rutland and Addison; Chittenden Grand Isle, and Franklin; Washington and Orange; and Essex and Orleans counties.

Jeffrey P. Roberts followed Ogden’s book with *The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese*, published in 2007 by Chelsea Green. It lists 345 artisanal cheese producers in 45 U.S. states, with 36 in Vermont and five in New Hampshire.

Cheese lovers may note that the census of Vermont cheese producers continues to grow. Julie Danyew of Orwell, cheese maker for Vermont Ayr Farmstead Cheese, has also begun marketing her own Danz Ahn Farm artisanal goat cheese this winter. She learned to make cheese at Consider Bardwell Farm in West Pawlet.

In recognition of the growing enthusiasm for artisanal cheeses, the University of Vermont has created the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese, a combination of education, research, technical services, and public service. Public education classes range from cheese tasting to technical practices.

To date, 475 students have participated or are currently enrolled in either the Cheesemaking Certificate program for beginning cheesemakers or the Advanced Cheesemaking Certificate program, according to UVM spokesperson Jody Farnham. Students may take advantage of “international programming,” in classes led by “colleagues from around the world.” Participants come from across the state, including representatives from Grafton Village Cheese, Jasper Hill Farm of White River Junction, Blythedale Farm of Corinth, and Bonny View Farm of Craftsbury.

Farnham attributes the increasing interest in cheese to “a strong sentiment of coming back to the land,” tied into the “slow food” movement.

That back-to-the-land movement, whether affiliated with a food source, a vacation spot, or the location of one’s second home, figures heavily into Vermont advertising efforts. Guests may come for a day, a week, or a lifetime, as they explore the state’s natural appeal.