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Twice Bitten: Considering Bardwell

By SHARON PARQUETTE NIMTZ

We glissando over glistening roads, the wipers swiping intermittently, the wet green greengreen green of early Vermont summer dense along the roadside.

"We" are my daughter and me, Zoe, back for a visit — we were just hanging out and talking and reading and making cheese, without the stress of the talk, talk, talk that long-distance telephone calls require. Daughters should be with their mothers, don't you think?

Reminds me of long ago, when she was little more than a baby, we put on our yellow slickers and went out into the drizzle to find some fiddleheads and found, as well, a whole, habitable, magic green world we would have missed had we viewed it only from inside the window. Today we're looking for West Pawlet, and Consider Bardwell Farm.

West Pawlet? Whoever knew such a charming village could be so hidden betwixt and between this maze of old roads that even I, in these more than 30 years, had never heard of it much less run across it in my travels.

It appears. Mistily like Brigadoon. Look away and it might be gone. A mile or so beyond the village center appear the brick house and out-buildings, and the chocolate-shaded Swiss Oberhasli goats, of Consider Bardwell.

It is the second stop on a little cheese tour we're devising — our first stop was at Al Ducci's Italian Pantry in Manchester to watch Al Sheps make his fabulous creamy fresh mozzarella. None better, in my opinion, and perhaps that is because when you buy mozzarella there it has not yet been refrigerated and the cheese remains soft and layered and oozes creamy liquids.

How many times over the years had Zoe and I torn into one of those juicy ovoids, the size of a child's football, right in the car, unable to wait for home, tearing off strandy sheets and stuffing them into our mouths, with an occasional bit for the dog in the back seat.

There's no one home at Consider Bardwell except for Bob Hahn — "just a darn good helper" is how he bills himself — who tears himself away from a ladder leaned against the red brick house to meet and greet us.

Almost as though he knew we were coming, he drops everything and graciously takes us on a tour of the many brick out-buildings — including the old brick granary with ventilating, lacy, brickwork — and shows us where the first dam was located, that, with a waterwheel, fueled what would be Vermont's first cheesery, and, in 1862, the first cheese co-op.

The farm was owned by a man named Consider Bardwell, whose mother's name was Experience, for whom the AGED Chèvre has been named. Chèvre, of course, is a fresh goat's milk cheese, christened Mettowee at Consider Bardwell, after the river that runs through the farm, and, since the goats are only milked in summer, Chèvre can only be made in summer. For winter use it is aged, and called Experience.

We easily spend an hour exploring the state-of-the-art cheesemaking room with its stainless-steel vats, and the climate-controlled "caves," which are rather vast new coolers lined with shelves full of cheese rounds of varying sizes and shades of tan. And on to the other end of this very large barn, where the babies gambol in their spacious pens, where Bob built them a little fort with a hidey-house at the base, and broad steps leading up to the fortress top and the doorway into the pasture at the front of the barn. The goats like to climb. Across the road the young, yet-to-be-bred females who graze in the rock-ribbed pasture love to climb on those rocks.

We traipse a labyrinth of movable electric fencing to the field, in the midst of the 300-plus farm acres, where the nannies are grazing. Inquisitive, sleek, bright-eyed, nuzzling our hands, chewing on our shirt-tails, asking us who we think we are. There are 44 milkers among 90 goats not counting the babies and the two rams. Bob would prefer the nannies' munching field to be not quite so flat — their bodies are designed to climb, and upward they wish to go.

Meeting the rams after meeting the kids and nannies is a slightly jarring experience for both Zoe and me. Long-bearded, scraped up, slightly scruffy, twice as big as the nannies, yet their eyes betray a heightened and developed sense of humor, as they greet us gruffly. There are only two of them, so we are not sure if the joke is on us or on them: Was the joke that all those nannies needed only two rams, or that two rams were sufficient to the task?

Finally, back to the cheesemaking room, where Peter Dixon had arrived. Zoe won't quite be able to get the seductive and strangely personal odors of the cheesemaking room out of her mind for a long time.

"Peter," she says now, "looked like he would be perfectly happy to dive into the cheesemaking vat, where he cuts and then scoops up the custardy mass of curds floating at the top." Indeed, he seems to have made a home there, among the vats of milk and the temperature gauges, and testing vials.

Angela Miller, the owner of Consider Bardwell, with her husband Russell Glover, had told me a great deal about Peter in the times we'd spoken at the Rutland Winter Farmers' Market, where she is a vendor, and also at the summer market in Depot Park. "Peter is a wonder," she'd said. "We couldn't do this without him."

Peter Dixon learned the art of making Camembert from French visitors in the 1970s, and has worked in-depth with Allison Hooper at Vermont Butter and Cheese, at Shelburne Farms and Taylor Farm in Londonderry, was part owner of the Guilford Cheese Company and of Westminster Dairy, and there may be one or two cheeses in the world that he has not personally perfected, and one or two animals whose milk he has not used to make cheese. Brie, Camembert, Quark, Crème fraîche, Chèvre, Cheddar, Fontina, Fromage Blanc; in the style of Raclette, Reblochon, Toma, Gruyère, and Comté; from cow, goat, and sheep milk. Peter is a partner in the Consider Bardwell business.

At Consider Bardwell Peter makes cheese twice a day, six days a week. From goat's milk he makes the Metowee/Experience, the Danby, which is a feta, and the aged Tomme called Manchester, which has a nutty flavor. From Jersey cow's milk that he picks up from Lisa Kaiman's Jersey Girl Dairy in Chester on the way to West Pawlet from his home in Westminster West, he makes Rupert, a Swiss Alpine cheese reminiscent of Gruyere; Pawlet, an Italian-style, semi-hard Toma with a creamy texture; and Dorset, a washed rind in the style of French Raclette. Using half cow's milk and half goat's, he's experimenting with a Romano, a pungent, hard Italian grating cheese, and has developed one of my favorites, which is called, uncharacteristically, Quarry. Quarry lays claim to a deeply creviced rind, buttery flesh, and intensely pungent flavor with, when chilled, a slightly chalky ending which disappears at room temperature, when it is just meltingly rich. Angela thinks this cheese will be their breakthrough, world-class cheese. As though they didn't have one or two already.

By this time Angela has arrived, but she's changed into her bright turquoise, rubber, cheese room clogs, is busy scrubbing milk cans and looks to be in her element doing it.

Zoe and I take our leave, deciding on the road that our cheese tour has ended for the day. Next time she visits we'll drive up to Blue Ledge Farm in Salisbury, from which hail others of my favorite goat cheeses, and to their neighbors in Whiting, the Crawford Family Farm, who make the wonderful Vermont Ayr, but for now it's begun to rain again and a book in front of the fire sounds just the thing. As we drive away from Consider Bardwell, the mist closes around it, then through West Pawlet as we leave it, too, behind.

Talk with the Farmer

It's not until the end of summer, when Zoe has long returned down south to do art, make music, and mozarella, and live too far from her mother, that I am able to sit down with Angela at Consider Bardwell's kitchen table to tie some ends together.

This is one busy, well-traveled lady. Although she spends weeks at a time at the farm during kidding season in early spring, and then also much of July and August, the rest of the time she is back and forth to New York City to tend to her office — she has her own literary agency — from Monday through Thursday, which leaves weekends to attend the Rutland Farmers' Market, as well as farmers' markets in Dorset, Manchester and Londonderry. A partner, Chris Gray, attends New York City farmers' markets.

"I'm the farmer," Angela tells me. "Peter's the cheesemaker, Russell's the infrastructure, and Chris Gray does sales and marketing." Russell, an architect with his own practice in New York City with much experience in renovation, has left no stone unturned in finding grants and loans and ways of renovating the historic farm, working with Efficiency Vermont to make it energy efficient — just now he's working on plans to turn the silos into solar collectors — and building the caves.

Angela grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania and never got it out of her system. Led to New York City in the '70s by her career, she found herself setting out window boxes on the 12th floor to satisfy a deep-seated need to get her fingers into dirt of some kind.

Needing the kind of quiet and privacy that's hard to find in the city, she and Russell bought a historic fixer-upper on Shelter Island, and renovated it for a getaway from their New York City apartment and for Russell's office. At the same time, they began to explore Vermont, and, in 2000, Angela decided she needed the rural peace here.

When they came across the group of red brick buildings that would become Consider Bardwell, she fell hard. To take that particular leap the Miller/Glovers consolidated — they sold the Shelter Island house, which Russell, especially, loved, and moved to a smaller New York City apartment.

All this was done without knowing the history of cheesemaking the farm held; all this was done just for the sake of living at least part time in the countryside, in Vermont. But once they began to realize the history of the place the lure of cheesemaking and of goats took hold.

At the time they had an intern who had worked in France with goats and made cheese, who convinced them to invest in the Swiss Oberhasli goats. Angela drove to New Hampshire and brought six goats back in her station wagon.

Then the intern left. Kaput, gone, and Angela, well Angela "had never even seen a goat before I had six of them in the back seat of my station wagon."

The Wine Spectator

But oh well, that's the name of the game. Goats, and cheesemaking became a passion, and where there's a passion there's a way. Today Consider Bardwell makes 60,000 pounds of cheese a year. And today Angela is sitting at the kitchen table, looking pleased, with an issue of Wine Spectator spread out in front of her. 100 GREAT CHEESES, blares its headline. "From around the world," Angela said. "And 10 of them are from Vermont. And of those 10, three are from the Rutland Farmers' Market! And one of those three is Consider Bardwell's Manchester!"

About Manchester, Wine Spectator says, "This aged, raw goat's-milk cheese has big, bold and rustic flavors beneath its somewhat barnyardy nose. Its nuttiness and earthy bite are offset by its delightful fruity notes. Made in 2-to-3-pound tommes, it has a pleasantly creamy texture." As for an accompanying wine? "Tame this wild cheese with a complex white, such as a Savennières." And there you have it. Manchester!

Angela is thrilled with Manchester's success, but she is hardly less so at Vermont's other winners, especially those we are familiar with from the farmers' market. Of Blue Ledge Farm's Lake's Edge cheese, Wine Spectator says, "... this 1.5 pound cheese is aged for three weeks and has a clean, fresh taste, with a nice balance of creaminess and acidic tang." And of Crawford Family Farm's Vermont Ayr, "The (Ayrshire) cows are noted for producing milk with butterfat globules that result in a smooth, creamy and sweet cheese. That sweetness plays off some spiciness, which, along with that nutty alpine nose, make this a delight."

Other Vermont cheesemakers noted in the Wine Spectator are Jasper Hill with its Winnemere, and again with its Bayley Hazen Blue, as well as in combination with Cabot for Cloth bound Cheddar, and with Grafton for its Cloth Bound Cheddar. Grafton got another mention for its Cheddar One Year, and Shelburne Farms for its Cheddar Two Year. And Thistle Hill for its Tarentaise, One Year. WOW!

Just a note here, that Jasper Hill has built state-of-the-art caves in order to provide aging for their own and for other cheesemakers. Angela is appreciative of that service, though Russell has built their own caves, and she says, "I don't want my cheeses four hours away — I want to visit my cheeses every day."

I think that Angela's mention of the three OUT OF 100 WORLD cheeses getting their start at the Rutland Farmers' Market is more than mere pride — if it weren't for farmers' markets, how would these cheeses get started? How would these farms make a living with their acreage, with their animals, and with their products? What store would take a chance on a newcomer to the marketplace, what farm just starting out could produce enough to satisfy the needs of a Hannafords?

Farmers' markets prove their importance over and over again, maybe especially as regards cheese — that magical, ancient, intuitive endness of milk.

Cheese may be the end result, but more than that, "more than anything else," Angela says, "I love the animals. I even love milking!"

Isobel Gabel Nimtz contributed to this column.

Twice Bitten columns are archived at www.thriceshy.blogspot.com. Thanks for your comments and questions, emails and calls. They reach me at the Rutland Herald, P.O. Box 668, Rutland, 05702 or by e-mail at snimtz@gmail.com.