

MAKING AND MARKETING SHEEP MILK CHEESE (OR HOW TO START A SHEEP DAIRY AND LIVE TO TELL ABOUT IT)

Cynthia L. Callahan
Bellwether Farms
Petaluma, California

- I. Introduction
- II. Brief History of Sheep Milk Cheese
 - A. 8000 BC – Sheep becomes second animal domesticated by the nomads
 - B. The first cheese – ancient legend
 - C. Cheesemaking brought to Europe by travelers from Asia
 - 1. Middle ages
 - a) Cheese made in monasteries in Europe
 - b) Cow replaced ewe as the major milk producers in the world
 - 2. Major sheep milk cheeses
 - a) France – Roquefort
 - b) Italy – Pecorino Romano
 - c) Spain – Manchego
 - d) Other
- III. Bellwether Farms – a Chronology
 - A. 1986 – moved to Sonoma County
 - B. 1988 – Began selling lambs
 - 1. Start accelerated lambing program
 - 2. Direct marketing to Bay Area restaurants
 - C. 1990 – Built sheep dairy
 - D. 1992 – Began making sheep milk cheese
 - E. 1996 – Added cow milk cheese
- IV. Sheep Dairying at Bellwether Farms
 - A. How it started – 1990
 - 1. Original flock
 - a) Dorset vs. Polypay
 - b) Raised market lambs
 - 2. Visit from Olivia Mills
 - B. Management of lambs
 - 1. Creep-fed from the start
 - 2. Weaned at 35 days of age
 - 3. Most sold as “milk-fed” to Bay Area restaurants
 - C. Milking of ewes
 - 1. Dairy set-up
 - 2. Milking schedule
 - 3. Care and feeding of ewes
 - 4. Length of lactation and milk volume
 - D. Recent improvements

1. Better genetics
2. New dairy

V. Making Cheese

A. How we learned

1. Short courses – very valuable for learning the scientific aspects of making cheese
2. Travel to Italy – Tuscany and Umbria

B. Deciding what cheese to make – some considerations

C. Building a cheese plant on the farm

1. Consult State regulations at the outset
 - a) State will require a plan
2. Cheese room
 - a) Epoxy floors
 - b) Walls – how covered?
 - c) Drainage
3. Cheese making equipment
 - a) Pasteurizer
 - b) Cheese vat
 - c) Stainless tables, sinks, etc. – Where to obtain
 - d) Cheese forms – determined by the type of cheese you are making
 - e) Other

D. Cheesemaking process

1. Proper care of the milk
 - a) Fresh vs. frozen
2. Pasteurization process
 - a) Whether to pasteurize
 - b) Batch vs. HTST
3. Steps in cheesemaking
 - a) “The Recipe”

Each cheese has its own make procedure. To make a specific cheese, it must be followed exactly (or you could make your own recipe)
 - b) Cultures
 - 1) Depends on type of cheese
 - 2) Direct set – best for small producers
 - 3) Readily available
 - c) Rennet
 - 1) Animal vs. vegetable
 - 2) How long to set
 - d) Cutting the curds
 - 1) Determining the correct time to cut
 - 2) What size to cut
 - e) Draining the curds
 - 1) Curds put in cheese forms
 - 2) Whey drains off (used for Ricotta)
 - 3) Turning cheese
 - f) Salting and ripening cheese
 - 1) Brine vs. hand salting
 - 2) Natural rind ripening
 - 3) Proper temperature and humidity

- 4) Waxing
- E. Recent Developments at Bellwether Farms
 - 1. Cow milk cheese
 - 2. New cheese room
 - 3. Additional ripening rooms

- VI. Marketing
 - A. Establish Identity
 - 1. Name
 - 2. Logo
 - 3. Stationary, business cards, brochure, product list, etc.
 - B. How we started – lambs
 - 1. Bay area location
 - 2. Selling direct to restaurants
 - C. Types of markets
 - 1. Farmers markets
 - a) Lamb and cheese
 - b) Originally 70% of cheese sales. Today under 1%
 - c) Advantage – retail price
 - d) Disadvantage – time and labor intensive
 - 2. Restaurants
 - a) Direct
 - b) Distributor
 - 3. Retail stores
 - a) Mainly distributors
 - 4. Mail order
 - a) Advantage – retail
 - b) Disadvantage – time, packaging
 - c) Credit cards
 - 5. The future – the Internet
 - D. How to market – depends on budget
 - 1. Restaurants
 - a) Letters
 - b) Sales calls with samples
 - 2. Participate in food tastings
 - a) Wine auctions
 - b) Benefits
 - 3. Fancy Food Show/Trade Shows – When you are ready to expand
 - 4. Free advertising
 - a) Press releases
 - b) Articles in newspapers and magazines
 - 5. Hire a food broker

- VII. Economics – General observations
 - A. Start up costs
 - 1. Depends on many factors
 - a) Size, State regulations, labor costs, etc.
 - B. Operating expenses
 - 1. Labor is a major expense

- C. Develop a plan
 - 1. Consult the experts – University, dairy advisor, CPA, etc.
 - 2. Determine State requirements
- D. Develop a budget and update on a regular basis
 - 1. Analyze monthly sales and expenses
 - 2. Respond to new developments
- E. Respond to new developments
 - 1. Competition

VIII. Closing remarks

Cynthia L. Callahan
Liam Callahan
Bellwether Farms, LLC
9999 Valley Ford Road
Petaluma, California 94952
Tele:L (707) 763-0993 or (888) 527-8606
Fax: (707) 763-24433
Email: BFCHEESE@AOL.com
www.Bellwethercheese.com