

SHEEP CHEESE-MAKING AND MARKETING

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You probably have the totally wrong person standing in front of you. If everything would have gone the way I promised Theres (the better looking half of our farm cheese-making operation) back in '92 when we started out, we would be laying on a beach somewhere in the south right now.

But nevertheless, since I am standing here, I will start bragging now. I have to admit that there are probably much better cheese makers, much closer to Guelph, than me. But I would like to show you where my wife, Theres, and I came from and what we have experienced on our cheese-making journey since 1983. In 1983 I took a cheese-making course in Switzerland where I went high up in the Alps to make cows' milk cheese. Since then we have made cheese, and we have become masters at improvising on what is now called artisan cheese-making. I would like to show you a few slides of the traditional way of cheese-making in the Alps and the translation of that to North America.

If you have two million dollars to spend on your cheesery, there are people with much more expertise than Theres or me, but I believe we know how to make a decent cheese as simply as possible.

I actually think the equipment we use now is really too complicated, and I would not mind going back to the good old copper vat and the open fire. When I took that mountain cheese-making course in 1983, one of the first questions the instructor asked was on which Alp we were going to spend the summer. When I told him where we were heading, he informed me that our Alp was one of the most primitive places still operating, and he was right. We had to carry every drop of water 100 feet uphill to the cheesery from a well that produced the same amount of water at the same temperature all year round. The water had to be heated on the same fire as we heated the 250 liter copper vat with the milk. We also cooked our meals on this fire. To get to the corner of the shack where we made the cheese, you had to walk through the barn where we milked the cows twice a day. That part of the building had a wooden floor; the cheesery had a dirt floor. A hole in the roof replaced the chimney. The drain-table was a wooden board. We nailed a piece of wood above the cheese mould on the log wall behind the press and stuck a branch over the cheese mould and under that wood. On the branch that stuck out over the press table, we hung a rock to press the cheese. Parts of the cheese knife and the tool to stir the curd in the whey were made out of wood. To pull the curd out of the whey, you used a soft flat steel that you wrapped into one side of the cheese cloth. The opposite two corners of the cloth, you held with your teeth. With the bendable flat steel, you then followed the curve of the vat and pulled out as much cheese as needed to fill the mould. The moulds were made out of wood too, of course. To test if the brine of the salt bath was strong enough, you put a raw potato in it. If it sinks, you add more salt. If it starts to swim, you knew the salt content was right. You know, there are some real good cheeses coming from places like that, some not so good as well.

Here in British Columbia, Canada, we turned an old unfinished horse box stall into our cheesery where we now process about 50,000 liters of sheep milk annually into 5 different cheeses, yogurt and butter. Right from the start, we worked together with the dairy and dairy plant inspector, so that now everything is tiled, stainless steel, and even the hot water comes out of a tap. We never showed the Alp pictures to any of the inspectors and never told them that up there sometimes we would have a bath in the whey in the vat after pulling the curd out of it. Well, we did clean the vat afterwards. Even up there, we cleaned all milking and cheese-making equipment very thoroughly, the milking equipment twice daily, sanitizing it with boiling water. Cleanliness is the most important thing when you work with milk. Some cheeses can handle a little more than others, but you can only make a good end product with good milk and clean equipment. The smaller the surface that the milk touches on its way from the udder to the vat, the easier it is to keep the quality up. To me, as a cheese maker, hand milking would be the best because all you have to clean is one bucket - no pumps, seals, elbows or 30' milklines. But I am also a farmer, so I do like our milking machine and low line system.

With that background, we started up our cheese-making here, and that is where the marketing ties in with the cheese-making. I think that we, with our industry, have a big advantage over other specialty livestock producers. As soon as you have dairy sheep, you have sheep milk which will turn sour if you do not process it, and if you turn it into cheese, it has to be sold fairly soon or it will rot in the curing room. The marketing of the end product goes hand in hand with the breeding of the livestock - something many ostrich breeders did not look into enough. Well, it did not always go hand in hand at Mountain Meadows, and our dogs got pretty fat eating front end loaders full of sheep milk Brie in our first year of production.

We started out making Brie as our first type of cheese. I love white mould cheeses. We looked at the prices of Brie in the stores, and we figured "Man, we've got it made. Two or three years making that stuff and we will retire." We are still making Brie. There is a reason why Brie is expensive and why very few cheese makers make it. We found out Brie is a tough one to make. You not only deal with bacteria and enzymes, but you also have to fight with mold, or even worse, with molds. Brie also prefers a more neutral pH, but so do E. coli and all its friends. From a marketing point of view, Brie may be a good cheese to start out with, because the return is o.k. and it does not take a long time to cure, but if you are lambing, milking, and cheese-making all at the same time, try to find time to go to the city and sell your Brie, that will turn into an ammonia smelling goo in another 10 days, to some city boy that runs a yuppie health food store. Maybe you better start out with Feta. The return is lousy, but it is a lot easier to produce with its low pH. You can stick it into the brine and sell it a week or a year later. Go back to the lambing barn, the parlor, or the symposium.

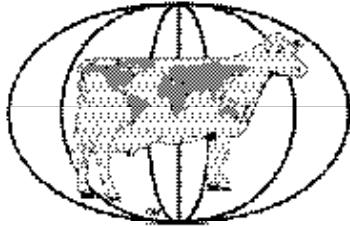
If you cannot stand behind a batch of cheese that you made, dump it. Your Border Collies will love you. The worst thing that can happen to us as a young industry, is to have "would like to be cheese makers" give away their strange looking and smelling samples to people that then will say for the rest of their lives "I have tried sheep cheese, man it's disgusting". You also know that word of mouth is our best advertising. The public education that it will take to boost our industry is way out of my budget. Sheep milk is such a smooth, sweet, silky product that we like to keep these features in the end product. We found it sells well because of the delicate taste, and once a customer is hooked, it is quite easy to convince him or her of the health benefits.

The price of the raw milk that we purchase depends on the time of the year and bacteria count. 3M has nice petri plates that we use for raw milk testing. After 24h of incubation, you know what kind of raw milk you are dealing with. But it does not tell you what change of feed the sheep had or in what stage of lactation the ewes are. That is when artisan cheese-making becomes an art, because you have to be able to read your milk and react to it. Some old cheese makers in the Alps with years of experience notice weather changes in the milk. One challenge in small-scale sheep cheese-making is that you most often have milk from ewes in the same stage of lactation. Milk from sheep early in lactation will coagulate much faster than milk from ewes in late lactation. As you know, the composition of the milk changes throughout lactation, so to have a fairly consistent product, you have to react to all of that during the processing of the milk.

We used to go to all kinds of health food shows and agricultural fairs and give away tons of samples. We do not do that anymore. We found that people get too many impressions at a single show, so your product can get lost in the jungle of products. Most shows are very expensive. The samples you give out to people, that will not remember your product afterwards, can cost you an arm and a leg. In the first two years, we also delivered our products to the stores in Vancouver by ourselves. That would be the best, because you can keep an eye on the store shelf, and you can inform the dairy guy in the store about the benefits of sheep milk. Well, it got to the point where when driving to Vancouver, I could hardly step on the brakes anymore because I was afraid of yogurt running down my neck. We went through all kinds of delivery systems until we now have two big wholesalers, one in Vancouver and one in Calgary. Sometimes along the road, we have hired and fired a broker. For the 5% commission he cashed, he did not increase the sales enough.

This last summer you could find us weekly at three to four different Farmers Markets and one Public Market throughout BC. These markets are gaining popularity. You can sell your product at the same time that you give out samples and educate consumers. People, that realize that local food production, animal welfare, and healthy food choices are concerns that we as farmer's share with them, soon became a growing and regular customer base. Sometimes I am shocked by some city folk. Since we have been at these markets, we have had at least three adults asking us "what kind of sheep do you kill to make this cheese". I have to say that I am happy when fall comes and the markets slow down. But every spring, I ask Campell Jones, who sells honey beside us, if he did not learn anything either over winter because he is back again. I have to say that by about February, I start to miss the Market atmosphere and socializing (or gossip?).

Anyhow, we are very proud to be part of this unique industry, and we know that there is a huge potential for all of us to keep growing.



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