

W E D N E S D A Y , F E B R U A R Y 2 5 , 2 0 0 4

The Art of Making Sheep Milk Cheese



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Photo: Shepherd Gourmet Dairy's Stew Cardiff (left) with cheesemaker Sunil Radhakrishnan.

Nobody said that making cheese would be easy. And that's exactly what Stewart Cardiff, president of Shepherd Gourmet Dairy, learned when he launched the sheep cheese making business just over a year ago. Not only do they have to produce a consistent quality cheese, but find and establish a market share for their unique products.

Located on the 10th line of East Zorra Township, 5 km west and 1 km south of Tavistock, Shepherd Gourmet Dairy is a federally-licensed cheese plant. It produces several kinds of cheese – cream cheese (Liptoi), feta, romano pecorino, and haloumi – as well as yogurt and pressed yogurt. Their goal is to produce the highest quality sheep cheese and yogurt for natural food and specialty retailers and restaurateurs.

The business was originally started by Bill and Don McKay of JR Farms, who have a herd of 500 milking East Friesen ewes. They purchased the name – Shepherd Gourmet Dairy – and some equipment from a small-scale Saskatchewan manufacturer who was giving up the business. They built the facility on land next to their East Zorra farm two years ago. Bill left the business in his father's hands and now focuses on the milking ewes.

In the meantime, in the Brussels area, J. N. Cardiff Farms Ltd., Stew and his younger brother Rob, were milking 1,200 ewes and working 600 acres of land for cash crop. Stew, who earned his B.Sc. at Guelph, is a former Ontario director of agriculture and agri-business for the Toronto-Dominion Bank. He believed that with the right plan, he could produce quality cheese products with milk from their herd and other preferred suppliers.

"It's a hands-on process," he said, "with a lot of challenges."

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His background in the sciences served him well as he began the process of cheesemaking. The facilities are small and traditional with most of the work done by hand, so an understanding of the complete process was important. "The basis of good cheese is clean, quality milk," he said. And a consistent, quality product only comes with much collaboration and applied science.

With this in mind, Stew has assembled a dedicated team including the recent addition of cheesemaker Sunil Radhakrishnan, who grew up in India, was in the cheesemaking business there, and is now completing his Masters degree at the University of Guelph.

Sheep milk is considered to be naturally homogenized as compared to cow's milk, because the fat globules are smaller and more evenly distributed, making it more easily digested. The milk is brought to the factory where they can store up to 7,000 US gallons at one time. The fluid milk is pumped through a modern, computer-controlled pasteurizer that is closely monitored and the product tested regularly in plant. Two 4,500 litre vats are available to make the cheese as well as two smaller vats for yogurt production.

In a critique written by Julie Daniluk, a registered holistic nutritionist, from Toronto, she says "the truly remarkable thing about sheep milk is the taste." She notes that many people who have dairy allergies are simply substituting sheep milk where they would normally use cow milk. "And people with allergies can also benefit from using sheep's milk products," adds Mr. Cardiff.

The food service industry and restaurants are the company's prime customers because their fresh products can be shipped within a week as compared to European brands that take much longer to arrive.

Feta cheese is a salty, pickled cheese. It is cut and placed in pails of brine for 30-60 days to age, but can remain preserved in the brine for up to a year and a half. Ripening under brine gives the cheese a characteristic flavour and texture. Liptoi is a Hungarian soft cheese and the Shepherd Gourmet Dairy product "is great on bagels," Mr. Cardiff says. Haloumi is a white cheese, originally from Cyprus, and is excellent for frying because it retains its shape when heated. It can be grated over pasta, on salads, omelettes, sliced and eaten on sandwiches or as an appetizer served alone. Romano is a hard, flavourful grating cheese related to parmesan. Romano cheese is high in protein and provides a good source of calcium, iron and phosphorous.

Sheep milk yogurt is the traditional favourite of people from countries around the world. Fresh sheep milk creates a rich, yet delicate taste, matched with a delightful yogurt tang with only 5 per cent milk fat. It can be enjoyed, mixed with meusli, or in recipes calling for sour cream or crème fresh.

There is a lot of pride and love for the products that Shepherd Gourmet Dairy produces, as well as for the animals that provide the fresh milk. While a cow can produce 30 litres of milk a day, a ewe produces less than two litres a day, so it takes some 3,500 ewes to provide milk for the dairy. Shepherd Gourmet Dairy could become the largest sheep dairy in Canada. They presently employ six people on a day shift.

The principles in the company include Stew Cardiff and partners Don McKay and Mike Bastiensen, as well as John Vella and Paul White who look after marketing and distribution.

Early in the process, the company not only had to produce a consistently high quality product, but find new and innovative ways of getting the product to the table. A marketing and distribution strategy was developed and a new label designed and implemented. Sharon Morrice of Uber Design, Stratford, collaborated on the product packaging and also developed the web site.

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Today, the company boasts product sales in nearly all provinces as well as states in the US including California, where consumers are noted for being health conscious. Consumers also appreciate the fact that the milk is higher in calcium, protein and B vitamins than other milk sources. European immigrants who grew up on sheep milk cheese are also a large part of the specialty market.

But the thing that actually sells sheep milk cheese is in the tasting, Mr. Cardiff says.

Locally, their products are available in Tavistock at Steph's Cheese Plus and in St. Marys at Towne and Country Cheese Shoppe.

For additional information on sheep milk cheese and yogurt products, go to their web site at www.shepherdgourmetdairy.com