

The Boston Globe

WEDNESDAY, MAY 1, 2013



food travel

Staking the future on making their Vt. cheese

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SOUTH WOODSTOCK, Vt. — Perched on a hill overlooking a valley, Farmstead Cheese Co. began as a neighborly plan to preserve a dairy farm.

The bucolic 18-acre site was a former water buffalo farm and creamery that produced mozzarella and yogurt. When its owners moved to Canada and put the land up for sale, locals worried about the loss of jobs and the disappearance of another bit of the Green Mountain State's rich heritage. They feared that the pastoral landscape might be grabbed by a developer.

So 14 neighbors banded together to buy the farm and decided cheese making might safeguard its future. Within the year, they rebuilt the creamery, brought in a mixed breed herd — Holstein, Jersey, Ayrshire, and Swiss Brown — to blend milks and make farmstead cheese. They started the first community-owned dairy farm in the state. In two years, the company has won dozens of awards for its cheddar, a harvarti-style tilsit, Edam, and English and French-style cheeses.

The new owners are not novices. They include seasoned farmers and food industry executives who hired experienced staff. The top cheese maker, Rick Woods, 46, has been plying his craft for 19 years. "We're a new company, but it's not the first time around the block for these people," says Sharon Huntley, who is in charge of marketing.

On a recent morning, Woods and an assistant were in the creamery making cheddars. He starts each day at 6 a.m., producing about 4,000 to 10,000 pounds of cheese a week, depending on the season, in a dozen varieties. "I watch the sun rise," Woods says. The two wear white lab coats, rubber boots, and hairnets, and work quickly at a stainless steel vat, which holds close to 600 gallons of coagulated milk, as they rake the custard-like mass (curds), to separate them from the liquid (whey). The sweet smell of warm milk wafts from the vat as the moisture begins to cook away. Making cheese, says Woods is "alchemy and chemistry."

In an adjacent room, racks are filled with aging raw-milk cheeses that sit for three to six months and longer. There are blocks of WindsorDale, firm and flaky, made from an 1800s recipe for English Wensleydale, along with buttery and crumbly cheddars, some flavored with wild blueberries or whole cranberries. Wheels and cylinders of Lille, rich and creamy with a firm core and supple rind,



BRAD PETTINGILL (COWS, FARMERS) AND KRISTIN TEIG (CHEESES)/VERMONT FARMSTEAD CHEESE CO.

Rick Woods (left) and Tom Gilbert and a variety of their cheeses, which come from the 135 cows at Farmstead Cheese Co. in South Woodstock, Vt.

similar to French Coulommiers, sit in another room, where cool temperatures help them slowly ripen.

Meanwhile, cows shuffle from the barn to the stalls, picking which one they want, in a nearby milking parlor: Ten at a time stand nose to tail as they are milked mechanically. "They know right where to go and when they're done they just head back," says Marjorie Hardy, who handles the milking. Hardy, 22, was raised on a dairy farm in Maine and studied animal science at the University

of Connecticut.

There's a herd of about 135 in the barn, which include heifers and calves. Here is Marcy, a sweet-tempered black Jersey, and a much larger Holstein, Niagara. "She doesn't make trouble," says Hardy. "She's a fly-under-the-radar kind of gal." Mya, which happens to be Hardy's Ayrshire, is friendly and comes running when you call her. The Brown Swiss, Lilly Belle, with her big head and floppy ears, must know she's adorable. "It's like a playground of kids," Hardy says.

Vermont Farmstead Cheese Co. products are available at Formaggio Kitchen, 244 Huron Ave., Cambridge, 617-354-4750 and 268 Shawmut Ave., Boston, 617-350-6996; Wasik's Cheese Shop, 61 Central St., Wellesley, 781-237-0916; Concord Cheese Shop, 29 Walden St., Concord, 978-369-5778; Roche Bros. markets; or go to vermontfarmstead.com.

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