

Michigan State Dairy Plant Veterans Carry On Leelanau Cheese Legacy

Suttons Bay, MI—One of Michigan's most loved and lauded artisan cheese companies will continue making its award-winning, signature Raclette under new ownership.

Leelanau Cheese Company here was founded in 1995 by Detroit native John Hoyt and his wife Anne, whom he met while learning to make cheese in the Valais region of Switzerland.

Since then, the company has firmly established itself as a leader in Michigan's artisan cheese community, introducing residents and out-of-state consumers to its flagship cheese, Raclette.

“There’s also a ton of data that shows informed customers are return customers. Educated customers also associate their education with a product’s value.”

—Joshua Hall, Leelanau Cheese

Among its many awards, Leelanau's Alpine style Raclette won a Super Gold trophy at the 2016 World Cheese Awards in Spain – a competition that hosted more than 3,000 cheeses from around the world. Also, in 2007, the company's Aged Raclette captured Best of Show honors in the American Cheese Society's Annual Competition.

After making cheese together for 25-plus years, the Hoyts announced plans to retire in 2020, scaling back production during the pandemic and putting the operation up for sale.

This opportunity sparked tremendous interest from Leelanau's new managing partners Joshua Hall, cheese maker, and Gary Smith, food safety officer.

Hall and Smith previously worked together for several years in the department of food science and human nutrition at Michigan State University. Hall joined the MSU faculty in 2007 as operations coordinator and production supervisor, focusing primarily on fermented dairy products and 12 different cheese varieties.

Smith also worked at the Michigan State dairy plant as a student while pursuing both his undergraduate and graduate degrees, eventually joining the plant staff as food safety officer.

Smith and Hall worked side by side for several years. When the pandemic hit, the future of the MSU Dairy Foods Complex – which is financially autonomous from the university – was uncertain.

“All of our staff was paid from the ice cream and cheese that we made,” Hall said. “In a lot of ways, it was a great simulation for our students, because we were a functional dairy facility.”

“We had all the same standards; we had to provide for ourselves and pay the bills to keep the lights on, so to speak,” he said.

At roughly the same time Hall and Smith were unable to predict the future of MSU's dairy



From left: cheese maker Josh Hall and food safety officer Gary Smith were taught the steps to make Leelanau's award-winning Raclette cheese by former owner and cheese maker John Hoyt.

plant, they came across an official announcement that the owners of Michigan's Leelanau Cheese Company were going to retire.

“Michigan's cheese industry is not Wisconsin's cheese industry; it's a much smaller contingent of individuals,” Hall said. “We've known John and Anne through the Michigan Cheese Makers Cooperative, back when it was a more functional entity, about 10 years ago.”

“We've both been lovers of Leelanau cheese, and agreed that this would be a tremendous opportunity if we can pull this together,” Hall added.

That conversation happened in July 2020, with Hall and Smith meeting with John and Anne the next month. At this point, the Hoyts were considering several offers for both the property and the business.

Gary and I came in with our functional partners and minority

partners, and purchased the land and the business, together, Hall said.

“Our interest in acquiring Leelanau Cheese was to continue the incredible tradition that John and Anne have established over the last 25 years,” Hall said.

“For us, the Leelanau Cheese acquisition was like, ‘Hey – let's get mentored by John and Anne Hoyt, and continue to make Raclette cheese,’” he continued. “I don't think Gary or I have any interest in disrupting that tradition in any significant way.”

Leelanau purchases its milk supply from two dairy farms within a one-hour radius of the plant. At its peak Leelanau was making about 26,000 pounds of cheese annually.

“I think there are specific qualities that Gary and I bring to the table as far as ensuring the long-term legacy of Leelanau Cheese,

• See **New Leelanau Owners** p.21

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Vermont Creamery Debuts First Line Of Luxury Sour Cream

Websterville, VT—Vermont Creamery here has introduced the brand's first line of Cultured Sour Cream, available in crème-style classic and two Latin-inspired flavored varieties.

The new line hits dairy cases in the Northeast this September, but product development was initiated well over a year ago. Vermont Creamery's culinary team worked to create flavors inspired from slow smoking, charcoal cookery, and fire roasting with different woods and preparations.

They developed hundreds of flavor concepts before narrowing the field and selecting two finalists, designed around complementing Latin-inspired food and potatoes – 70 percent of sour cream usage occasions.

Vermont Creamery's Cilantro Lime is an ideal pairing for spicy dishes, and its Fire Roasted Onion & Chive features a savory sweetness with smoky and roasted notes.

"The last 15 months generated consumer demand for new taste experiences and the desire to shake things up from the norm," said Vermont Creamery president Adeline Druart.

"Our cultured sour reinvents a beloved staple into a more luxurious offering, setting the new high bar for a rich and velvety sour cream experience," Druart said.

With 22 percent milk fat, compared to 18 percent milk fat in regular sour cream, the new line features the same blend of cultures as its Crème Fraîche.

The premium sour cream category in the Northeast is experiencing strong growth – growing nearly three times the rate of non-premium, the company noted.

Its launch program will include social media initiatives to drive awareness with videos, influencer seeding and a virtual tasting event, in addition to in-store displays and post engagement programs.

"Premium food is on trend because consumers want to eat something they believe in," said Kate Paine, director of marketing for Vermont Creamery.

"We feel these next generation, '2.0 flavors' are approachable, but elevated and have no competition in today's marketplace," she said.

"Our sour cream, obsessively created with heart and soul, using simple ingredients, time and craftsmanship, gives people the opportunity to finally love a sour cream worth loving," Paine continued.

For more information, visit www.vermontcreamery.com.



New Leelanau Owners

Continued from p. 18

but we have no plans to make dramatic alterations to the current production roster," Hall said.

Customers will probably see Gouda in the future and may see some Cheddar, but to the extent of which those will be present, I'm not sure, Hall said. Certainly, there's no plan to disrupt the primary production of Leelanau.

Continuing Leelanau's Commitment To Sustainability

Part of Leelanau's beauty is that John and Anne really established a financially sustainable operation, Hall said. They've created a debt-free operation, which is also sustainable energy-wise.

Solar panels were erected last month, and the electric bill was about \$20, Hall said.

"There might be some scaled expansion of labor in a very calculated way, because the demand right now is just insane," he said. "Current production right now isn't set up to meet increased demand."

They have a great little model here, and we've already had a moderate increase in terms of labor, Hall said. Gary and I have brought in our wives, along with some MSU staff to support the venture.

Although the team has grown a bit, no plans for major expansion are on the horizon. Regarding equipment, there's some ideas in the pipeline to make a few modifications. The company will update its pasteurizer and some cleaning systems, but purchasing the operation as-is is what we want, Hall said.

"Basically, 'How did you guys become so successful making cheese for so many years,' and 'Show us how to do that,'" he said.

Hoyt's Raclette cheesemaking tutorial was deemed successful, thanks in part to Hall's previous experience making similar cheeses at MSU, including young Gouda.

"The attention to detail here is something we've been impressed with," Smith said.

"One thing that's been really striking is the fact that John and Anne are the cleanest cheese makers we've ever worked with," Hall said.

"It's been very good for us to witness that," he said. "Gary and I are very familiar with regulatory standards, and it's been so refreshing to see the kind of commitment to cleaning and sanitation that John and Anne have established here in their facility."

"There's a lot of catch-up on our part to embrace these standards," Hall said. "When you think about the knobs you have to turn as a cheese maker, it's about time, temperature and sanitation. John and Anne have made this place set up to be the cleanest place possible for the cheese they're making, and their commitment to that has been really cool to see."

Renewed Focus On Agro-Tourism, Consumer Education

Another big draw for Josh and I was how the facility was already set up to facilitate agro-tourism, Smith said. Since day one, Leelanau has been ahead of its time. Large windows have been installed in the storefront for visitors to observe cheese production.

"We've been posting when we're going to make cheese, and have people come to watch," Smith said. "One thing Josh and I bring to the table is experience with the education component."

"We really want to educate the community on the virtues of cheese

and dairy products, and share the good news about delicious cheese," Smith continued.

For us, it's not only good practice to be open to the public, but it's a lot of fun, Hall said.

"That's a big part of what made me happy at MSU," he said. "I did Mozzarella-making and ice cream-making classes all the time," Hall said. "There's also a ton of data that shows informed customers are return customers. Educated customers also associate their education with a product's value."

"Continuation of the legacy of Leelanau Cheese is very much tied to being transparent with our process and providing opportunities to learn about cheesemaking," Hall continued.

For the time being, distribution channels and retail partners will remain the same, Hall said.

"Right now, we're trying to get ahead of the curve, where our inventory can match our goals for distribution," he said.

Data collected by the American Cheese Society found that artisan cheese companies with diversified distribution channels tended to be the most successful, profitability-wise, Hall said.

Historically, the lion's share of John and Anne's sales were through their store-front, he said. We're looking forward to offering cheese sales online and eventually through select national distribution.

"Our priority is to maintain that sort of community," he continued. "We'll move forward based on our capacity to scale from there."

"We want to be able to supply this cheese first to the people who can point at the cows and the facility where it came from."

For more details, visit www.leelanaucheese.com.

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