



Maine Specialty Cheese Start-Up Aims To Provide 'Ultimate Classroom' For Visitors

Construction is underway here in New Gloucester, ME, for a new farmstead specialty cheese operation designed to inspire and educate visitors on the entire cheesemaking process and its progression from farm to fork.

Formerly a state mental health facility, the 4,000-plus acre location for Pineland Farms, Inc. was purchased in 2000 by the Libra Foundation, which makes grants to charitable projects that benefit Maine causes.

It took three years of major renovations to make the operation what it is today – working farm, business campus and educational and recreational venue.

The registered livestock owned by Pineland Farms and raised for breeding, education and production purposes includes Holstein dairy cows, Angus beef cattle, Katahdin Hair sheep and Icelandic sheep.

“Everything we build here is designed to have educational value. The plant will help generate income, but we’ll take it one step further and show the public the entire process from field to food.”

—Mark Whitney,
Pineland Farms

Milk from its Wilsondale Holstein herd – approaching 200 head – is sold to Oakhurst Dairy in Portland, about 20 miles south of New Gloucester.

A good percentage of that milk will soon be used for cheese manufacture. On September 27, 2005, construction began on a new 13,000-square-foot specialty cheese plant.

Cheese production is slated to begin mid-May of 2006.

Massachusetts-based construction firm Food Tech Structures was chosen to design and build the

plant.

“The architecture is very engaging,” said Mike Golden of Food Tech Structures.

“Our goal was to blend this building in with several other traditional wooden farm structures, so we are using a pre-engineered steel building with white side walls and deep green roof and a cupola on the roof...it looks great and is very cost effective,” Golden said.

The new cheese plant is being built not only to utilize a portion of the farm’s annual milk production for value-added farmstead cheese products, but to create the “ultimate classroom” for visitors, according to Mark Whitney, manager of cheese operations at Pineland Farms.

“Everything we build here is designed to have educational value,” Whitney said. “The plant will help generate income, but we’ll take it one step further and show the public the entire process from field to food.”

Tying Cheesemaking To The Land

Pineland Farms’ mission is to provide an educational venue that demonstrates responsible farming techniques.

Educational opportunities include family programs and student field trips like “From Moo to You,” where visitors meet the Wilson-Dale Holsteins and learn about dairy farming in Maine. Students investigate the processes by which milk is produced as well as explore the social and economic issues surrounding Maine agriculture.

Its approach to farming is based on the following principles: build (or rebuild) the most efficient barns possible; employ smart, professional farmers who are committed to local Maine agriculture; and continue to breed the best animals possible.

Following that approach, Whitney spent considerable time touring cheese factories across the US for ideas on plant and equipment configuration.

“Having worked the previous nine years as a cheese maker, I was asked to put forth a lot of design ideas,” Whitney said.

“I toured cheese factories across the country and brought back lots of ideas, incorporating educational aspects,” he continued.

For instance, Pineland Farms has dedicated a 10-foot education corridor complete with viewing windows running the entire length of its facility so visitors and students can witness firsthand every aspect of cheese production.

The facility will also offer resources to other farmers, accepting outside milk for cheese processing, Whitney said.

The operation has the capacity to process 3 million pounds of milk per year, roughly 300,000 pounds of cheese annually.

The construction design includes an oversized production room with space to add extra cheese vats to facilitate expansion. Pineland Farms also has permitted building space for additional coolers – making future production capacity up to one-and-a-half million pounds possible, Whitney said.

Marketing of Pineland Farms

Marketed under the “Pineland Farms” brand, its signature cheese will be specialty Cheddar, aged two to three years, Whitney said.

“If you’re in New England, you have to make Cheddar,” he said.

Eventually, Whitney said he would like to create a line of natural rind cheeses, including his favorite cloth-bandaged Cheddar. Pineland Farms will also make Baby Swiss, Monterey Jack and a line of flavored Jack cheeses.

Initially the staff will include three or four additional employees besides Whitney, at least one of which is experienced in cheese plant operations. Pineland Farms will draw other workers from the local area as needed, Whitney said.

Pineland Farms will sell its cheese on-site at its Visitors Center, which features a general store with Maine-made merchandise.

Pineland also operates a farm stand during the summer and fall showcasing fresh produce from local farmers and soon, its new line of cheeses.

While an official marketing strategy has yet to be developed, Whitney said he would like to sell Pineland Farms’ cheese to both retail and foodservice sectors throughout the US with a focus on New England.

“New England has a good cheese market,” Whitney said. “I think there’s plenty of space to fit us in.”

For more information, call (207) 688-4800 for Pineland Farms. •

