



Willamette Valley Cheese Helping Put Oregon's Artisan Cheesemaking on Map As It Produces Award-Winning Farmstead Cheeses

While the health and welfare of its herd and surrounding pastures are the core business ideology of one of Oregon's newest farmstead operation, Willamette Valley Cheese Company isn't afraid to look to its peers for marketing advice or inspiration.

Owners Rod and Melissa Volbeda began the Salem dairy 13 years ago, although the Volbeda family has been involved in the western dairy industry since 1962.

After graduating from Oregon State University with a degree in food science, Rod Volbeda worked for the Tillamook County Creamery Association (TCCA) for three years, serving in a variety of positions.



His career in cheesemaking actually began during his fourth year of college, when Volbeda went to Holland to study traditional Dutch-style cheese manufacture. While there, he apprenticed in three separate facilities, learning how to craft a variety of cheeses.

He and his wife began experimenting about eight years ago, trying different cheese recipes in the basement of their Salem home.

After three years of trial and error, the couple made a decision to replace some of its Holstein cattle with Jersey cows – specifically for cheese made from Jersey milk. Also at this time, the fledgling company began construction on a proper manufacturing space located 20 feet from the milking parlor.

A self-professed “stainless steel junkie,” Volbeda purchased used equipment to fit the 40-foot by 40-foot make area from TCCA and the former Sorrento Lactalis plant in Olympia, WA.

His 1,000-gallon vat pasteurizer – originally used for yogurt and sour cream manufacture – came from Kroger Foods.

Willamette Valley Cheese officially launched its line of specialty cheese products about two and a half years ago. Its herd of roughly 500 cows now includes 120 Jerseys and 360 Holsteins. Milk not used in cheese production is sold through a local cooperative.

“We believe our milk is the prime ingredient for our award-winning farmstead cheeses,” Volbeda said.

The company makes cheese three days a week – between 400 and 700 pounds per day, depending on style. So far, the consumer favorite is Havarti, Volbeda said.

“We actually started experimenting with a Brie in the basement, but it was hard to keep white mold cheese in our small refrigerators,” he said. Willamette Valley currently uses temperature-controlled, simulated caves in lieu of an aging room. The units are

40-foot long by 8-feet wide, but demand “outrageous costs” to run, Volbeda said.

Luckily, the farm is located on a hillside and the couple is in the process of bidding out construction costs for aging caves.

Subtle Flavors, Traditional Styles

Willamette's line of farmstead cheeses include Dutch-style Gouda, Havarti, Jack, Mozzarella and Italian Fontina. Some cheeses are updated with subtle herbs and spices, including the company's Cumin Gouda and Jalapeno Jack, both of which earned first place ribbons at the 2005 American Cheese Society (ACS) Cheese Contest this summer.

The company also received a second place ribbon for its Dutch-style Gouda.

In the 2005 United States Championship Cheese Contest, Willamette Valley took Best of Class in the Open Class Semi Soft Cheese

division with its Brindisi Fontina.

“Brindisi is my mother's maiden name, so although Fontina is one of Italy's great cheeses and has been made in the Alps since the 12th century, our 100 percent Jersey milk Fontina gets a little extra care and has a special family flair,” Volbeda said.

The Brindisi Fontina has a warm, golden glow and complex flavor, which develops over time from the lightly salted, shelf-aged hard rind, characteristic of the semi-soft cheese.

“Our Fontina flavor blends the best of old Italy with natural Oregon goodness tempered by our family touch,” he continued.

Willamette Valley sells its cheese at farmers' markets and upscale retail locations from Seattle, WA to Ashland, OR, as well as a few select stores in Ohio and Arizona.

“Our one-year-old Aged Gouda is really taking off, but our Havarti is the favorite,” Volbeda said. “Havarti sells very well in the Northwest – I don't know why. Maybe because it's a very basic cheese.”

“Specialty cheese is fairly new to us in this area,” he said, adding that more retail stores are making an effort to showcase specialty offerings and host cheese tastings.

Taking Advantage Of Distribution

After a few years of filling cut-and-wrap orders themselves, the Volbedas are taking advantage of the distribution chain by hiring on Distribution Plus, Inc.

“We're terrible marketers and salespeople,” Volbeda said. “We weren't getting into markets where people were asking for us.”

With DPI handling distribution concerns, there is less onus on Willamette's staff, which includes three full-time and two part-time workers, along with seasonal help during the spring and summer months to administer the farmers' market circuit.

Volbeda said he admires the marketing skills of another Oregon specialty cheese company, Central Point's Rogue Creamery.

“Rogue is very good at marketing its cheese. There's a lot to learn from them,” he said.

The specialty cheese market in the Northeast is such that companies rarely cross each other in their manufacturing styles, according to

Volbeda.

While some do a great job with the marketing end, we concentrate on the pastures and the animals, he said.

No Rush To Make Organic Cheese

The Volbedas' philosophical approach to farming includes the practice of environmental sustainability. They fertilize their pastures and crops with nutrient-rich compost free of herbicides or pesticides.

Their cows are not treated with hormones or antibiotics, and the surrounding pasture with its rich western soil and verdant fields is certified organic.

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—Rod Volbeda

The transition to organic began a few years ago. By June 2006, all of Willamette Valley's land and cows will be certified organic.

With a supply of organic milk, the company may produce a new style of organic cheese when the time comes.

“If we do, we'll create a new item and promote it as such, but we won't stick ‘organic’ all over the product,” Volbeda said.

“I don't think that will help sell our cheese. Our customers know what our philosophy is and what we're all about,” he said.

In the next 10 years, Volbeda said he would like to see his young company acquire more pastureland, complete construction on its aging caves – using the ground for cooling to save energy, and sell its cheeses beyond the northwestern region.

“I really enjoy what I'm doing, even if it's a little overwhelming at times,” he said.

“We are helping put Oregon on the map as one of the finest artisanal and specialty cheese producers in the nation,” he continued.

For more information on Willamette Valley Cheese, contact Rod and Melissa Volbeda at (503) 399-9806 or visit www.wvcheese.com. •