



Alemar Cheese Company

A small, six-year-old Minnesota artisan cheese company continues to gather awards and recognition for its French-style, washed rind cheeses. And now the company is looking to repeat that success with English-style cheeses at a California plant.

Located here about 80 miles southwest of the Twin Cities, Alemar Cheese Company is owned and operated by Keith Adams. He named the business after his two daughters, Alexandria and Mariel.

Just last week, Alemar earned a Good Food Award for its Bent River Camembert Style cheese – one of 17 US cheese companies to take home the honor. Not only must a cheese entry have exceptional taste to win the award, but the company must also practice sustainability and social responsibility.

Another big development for Alemar is a plan to launch a sister company in Sonoma county, CA.

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Keith Adams,
Alemar Cheese

Head cheese maker Craig Hageman is currently in charge of Mankato operations, and Adams will travel back and forth between the two plants.

"My vision is to make English-inspired cheese," Adams said. "There's tons of soft-ripened cheese makers in Northern California – especially in Sonoma and Marin."

"I grew up here, and both of my girls are in college in the Twin Cities. I had an empty house, and a desire to spend more time out here," he said.

Last August, Adams traveled to England to learn English-style cheesemaking at Somerset's Westcombe Dairy, and took a seminar at London's Neal's Yard Dairy.

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So far, the business plan is written, and Adams is investigating possible sites. Production capabil-

After Finding Success In Minnesota, Alemar Cheese Looking To Open California Plant

ity, on-site dairy and a retail store are among his considerations.

Alemar made its first batch of cheese in late April 2009. Adams' path to owning and operating a cheese company was anything but linear.

After college, he worked as a stock broker for Merrill Lynch in San Francisco and Minneapolis.

"I was good at it, but I wasn't passionate about it in the least," he said.

He eventually relocated to Mankato in 1994, and used his college bagel-baking experience to start his own operation, which successfully expanded to five locations in four years.

"I really enjoyed working in food, and it was a good period for me professionally," Adams said.

However, in 2002, the bagel market reached a plateau and by January 2005, Adams shut down operations.

The idea of returning to some kind of food-related business wouldn't leave him alone, though. Growing up in Northern California, Adams said he always envied the lifestyle of his winemaking friends.

"People think it's really romantic to make wine, but it's damn hard work," he said. "So is cheesemaking."

There were a couple of things I knew I needed to focus on, Adams said. First, I needed a really good mentor. The second was finding a really good milk source. Third, I needed to educate myself as much as I possibly could about what I was getting into.

"I aimed high," Adams said. "I looked at the best soft-ripened cheeses in this business and gravitated towards Cowgirl Creamery."

Adams ended up meeting with Cowgirl's Sue Conley at the 2008 American Cheese Society (ACS) meeting in Chicago.

"I walked in and thought a) – these are my people and b) – I'm an imposter," Adams said. "It was both nerve-racking and comforting."

Conley warned Adams about the multitude of people interested in starting a cheese business without knowing exactly what they're getting themselves into.

But she said she thought I could do it, Adams said. That was a magical moment.

Adams, along with seven financial backers, gathered somewhere between \$100,000 and \$200,000 in start-up funds. He then put together a business plan

and purchased the necessary cheesemaking equipment from Glen-garry.

The space they chose, an old Domino's Pizza commissary, was already food-grade ready with tile floors, drains and sinks, and glass-board walls. It simply needed to be retrofitted for production and a dedicated cheesemaking room.

Alemar uses a 200-gallon vat, and initially used about 70 gallons of milk for the first batch of cheese.

"With soft-ripened cheese, it usually takes four to six weeks before you can taste the cheese and find out if its right and you're on the right track," Adams said. "It took me about three cycles to get it where it was pretty good."

The first batch was under-salted, and the next batch was better. By August 2009, Adams honed his recipe and drove to the Twin Cities ready to sell.

"I targeted co-ops first because I was using organic, grass-fed milk, and I was a small, local producer," he said.

Almost all of the food co-ops agreed to sell Alemar Cheese straight away, and the company made it into several high-end restaurants.

For three-and-a-half years, I was the only person in the building besides my kid, Adams said. Over that time, I was able to get into Whole Foods Markets, Kowalski's and other gold-standard food stores.

"I wasn't making a nickel, but at least we weren't hemorrhaging money," he said.

The company now employs several part-time workers and a full-time cheese maker, Craig Hageman, in addition to Adams.

We're still a tiny company, but we're selling as far away as New York, Los Angeles, Texas and across the US. Alemar uses a distributor for the vast majority of its sales, but sells to some clients directly or online.

"It allows us more time to make cheese," Adams said. "I'd rather make cheese than ship cheese."

The company makes cheese three or four days a week, 3,000 to 3,500 pounds per month. For the first five years, Alemar got its milk from nearby Cedar Summit Farms, a fourth-generation, organic, grass-

fed dairy operation that just shut its doors this month. Alternative milk sources are also certified organic and grass-fed.

According to Adams, the biggest hurdle in starting his cheese business was a lack of self confidence.

"There were days when I was positive I could pull this off, and days when I was positive I was going to fall on my face," he mentioned.

Something allowed me to keep pushing forward, even when I was lacking confidence, he said. Not in



a straight line, but forward nonetheless.

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"We've been on a steady pattern of growth, and we're moving on a positive growth stretch. We're never going to be huge, and we don't want to be," he said.

"There's no exit strategy – we want to grow in an organic way and put the business on sound footing."

"We're interested in being profitable, but we're more interested in being great," he said.

For those looking to start a new operation, Adams said an intestinal fortitude to keep moving forward is a must.

"If you make good cheese and you love what you do, you'll probably get there," he said. "But it'll be a hell of a lot of work."

For more information, contact Alemar Cheese at (507) 385-1004 or visit company's website at www.alemarcheese.com.