

Washington State's Appel Farms To Open New Farmstead Artisan Cheese Plant

Ferndale, WA—Appel Farms' new farmstead cheese plant here, which broke ground last February and which will increase both production and efficiency, is slated for completion by the end of this month.

Third-generation Appel Farms was first established in 1967 in Washington state's Whatcom county by Dutch immigrant Jack Appel.

Now two of his sons, with the help of their wives and children, carry on the farm and cheesemaking tradition.

Son Rich Appel took over the dairy side of the operation, while the other son, John, led cheesemaking operations.

Originally a dairy farm, the determination to start a farmstead cheese business came unexpectedly more than 20 years ago.

"One day, a German guy came into the yard and said he heard there was a Dutch cheese maker in town, and asked us to start making Quark," said John's daughter Marlies Appel.

"That was a huge blessing, because it wasn't something they were going out and looking for – to become established cheese makers. My paka (grandfather) made cheese as a hobby," Appel continued.

That was the mid- to late-1980s, she continued. Appel Farms' first cheesemaking facility was less than 300 square feet, right off the milking parlor.

"When we started making Quark, we built the cheese room we are currently working in while we built the next one," Appel said. "It started as 800 square feet and we added on in every direction we could."

Appel Farms milks a herd of 600 cows, and half of the milk supply goes to cheesemaking. The other half is sold to Darigold, Inc.

The new manufacturing plant will be 12,000 square feet. Construction began last February, and completion is slated for the end of this month.

Appel Farms has three categories of employees – those who work on the farm, those who work in the cheese room and people who run the on-site café/retail store. There are roughly nine workers operating the cheese business, and at least 10 working year-round in the dairy.

About six employees run the deli/retail store.

"One of the things that we're most excited about is that everything is in one building, which sounds kind of silly because it seems obvious, but right now we have storage containers and storage buildings that are kind of scattered all over," Appel said.

"We're excited about that, but it's kind of bittersweet to me, because now I won't be walking from building to building, saying 'hi' to all of my family," she said.

We were just really crowded, Appel said. We were trying to make as much product as we could in this little building. The layout was kind of complicated, so it was hard to make multiple products at one time.

"You've got one person cleaning pasteurizers and filling the room with steam, and another person draining whey at the other end of the building – it turned into chaos sometimes," she said.

"We're excited for these beautiful high ceilings and loads of room so we can have more freedom to do whatever we need to do at what-



Third generation farmstead cheese company Appel Farms of Ferndale, WA, is expected to finish construction of its new cheese facility by the end of this month. The plant, which broke ground last February, will increase production and streamline operations.

ever time we need to do it," Appel continued.

The facility will also have viewing windows from outside that look right onto the Gouda vat.

The company currently manufactures Cheddar varieties including Mild, Sharp, Extra Sharp, Black Pepper, Bacon, and Garlic & Dill; Plain and Garlic Cheddar Curds; original and flavored Gouda; Parmesan, Quark, Feta, Paneer and Maasdameer.

The most popular Gouda flavors include Mild, Smoked, Red Pepper and Jalapeno. Distributors also picked up the company's most recent holiday edition called Nokkelost, which has a Norwegian flavor profile with caraway seeds, cumin seeds and cloves.

The decision to make Paneer and Feta was similar to Appel Farms' addition of Quark.

"It was literally just another guy who walked into our yard – just like the German man who asked us to make Quark," Appel said. "This time, it was an Indian guy who asked us to make this cheese called Paneer. We had no idea what it was, especially back then."

"The guy showed my dad how to make it then and there, and my dad said he'd start making it," she said. "It's taken us years and years to streamline the process and make it efficient, but it's been a fun journey to learn about that market."

Paneer also opened the door for Appel Farms to manufacture East Indian-style yogurt made without gelatin, preservatives, or artificial thickeners.

A small percentage of cheesemaking is likewise dedicated to Masdaam – a traditional, semi-hard Dutch cheese made from cow's milk.

It's been kind of a slow starter, honestly, but we recently got an award from the American Cheese Society (ACS), which was a lot of fun and kind of a surprise, Appel said.

"My dad's still tweaking the recipe a little bit, experimenting with warm room times, and hoping distributors will have more interest in it," she said.

Appel Farms sells to local retailers and employs a few major distributors to reach customers nationwide. Quark is sold primarily along the East Coast, while the yogurt and Paneer is distributed mostly along the West Coast to foodservice accounts.

"We also have local restaurants that buy a wheel of our Gouda here and there, but not on a large scale," Appel said.

An important element of Appel Farms is the company's receptiveness to consumer requests and new product innovation. The new facility will help increase both.

After we developed our new products, we stuck with them for years, adding a few new flavors here and there, Marlies Appel mentioned.

It was actually within these last few years that my dad has felt the freedom to be able to experiment and start new products, she continued.

"As we have grown, he's learned to let a few things that are really important to him like pasteurization be delegated to other employees," Appel said. "Right now, he's making Parmesan, which is a lot of fun. He's also started making Havarti."

As we've gotten bigger, he's been able to have more freedom, she said. It's a really cool thing for me to see, because he's worked so hard my whole life.

"This has been our dream for years – to build this manufacturing plant was the biggest thing we could even dream of for so long," Appel said. "Now that it's happening, I don't think we've thought beyond it."

We want to see processes streamlined in the new building, and work out all the little kinks with making that big of a change, and my dad would like to see five steady years of income after that.

"Not necessarily increasing and hopefully not decreasing – just five steady years," she said.

For more information, contact Marlies Appel at (360) 384-4996 or visit www.appel-farms.com.

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