

Three Dairy Grazier Families Form Edelweiss Co-op to Manufacture Grass-Based Cheese

Monticello, WI—Edelweiss Grazier Cooperative was formed here recently by three dairy grazer families who purchased the cheese plant of Edelweiss Creamery to craft specialty, grass-based cheese from their rotationally-grazed dairy herds.

Bill and Roz Gausman, Bert and Trish Paris and Dan and Shelly Truttman will own the facility, while Bruce Workman of Edelweiss Creamery will make the cheese using the equipment owned by Edelweiss Creamery.

Edelweiss Creamery is owned by Workman, Shirley Knox and Jeff Wideman. Production of Edelweiss Creamery's current products will not be affected and, although the new cooperative leaders would not specify which products they would be making, they will not be in competition with those manufactured by Edelweiss Creamery.

“When I started making cheese, this is how we made cheese. Everyone was a grass-based farmer. For me it’s full circle. It comes back to the roots. The heritage.”

—Bruce Workman,
Edelweiss Grazier Cooperative

Workman did describe the cheeses as high-end, in nine-pound wheels. “It’s very exciting. It gives me an opportunity to try varieties that I haven’t produced,” Workman said. “I’ll have to make this product with a little age.”

All together the newly formed cooperative will process the milk of nearly 300 crossbred cows.

Cooperative president Bert Paris said the formation of the co-op is a dream come true.

“The chance to market grass-based cheese is something we’ve talked about for about 10 years,” Paris said. “To have this opportunity, in a product we have so much compassion about, and to have Bruce and Jeff and Shirley Knox work with us to market and produce the product is beyond words for us.”

The co-op will add another

100,000 pounds of milk a week in production to the cheese plant, Workman said. “That’s a 50 percent increase,” he said.

“The cheese is a little tougher to make because the variables are greater,” Workman said. “Change in weather, change in grass, change in milk quality. It’s huge. We have to be faster to keep the quality to where it needs to be.”

Workman described the milk as higher in yield, with higher fat and better protein.

“To have a quality cheese maker wanting to make our grass-based milk into cheese is very exciting,” said Bert Paris of Workman, who is a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker.

Truttman noted that combining their knowledge of farming with the knowledge of Workman and Wideman affords confidence in the venture.

“Our strengths and their strengths complement each other,” Truttman said. “We’re going to focus on what we do best.”

Paris believes the grass-based cheese is really the traditional way of making cheese, as opposed to the more conventional method.

“I think we took about 30 years off where we went to stored feeds and you can see the difference in the cheese quality.”

Workman agrees: “When I started making cheese, this is how we made cheese. Everyone was a grass-based farmer. You didn’t see cows locked up in a barn all day long. For me it’s full circle. It comes back to the roots. The heritage.”

The co-op is already looking toward the future. “We are actually the first co-op in Wisconsin to form under the new co-op law that allows for outside investors,” Truttman said. “It gives us more options” to grow and expand.

That new law, signed by Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle on May 30, authorizes the creation of a new type of business organization, called an unincorporated cooperative association. The law was supported by, among others, the Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives, the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, and Wisconsin National Farmers Organization.

Workman said that all of the cheese that will be made through the



(Left to Right) Dan and Shelly Truttman, Roz and Bill Gausman, Trish and Bert Paris have combined to join forces with Jeff Wideman and Bruce Workman to establish Edelweiss Grazier Cooperative.

co-op has already been sold. “Everything we make this year is sold,” Workman said. “Which is pretty awesome when you are starting a new project and you haven’t even turned a pound of cheese out of it yet.”

Truttman said one of their goals is to bring more farmers into the cooperative. He said the move allows families to take control of their own destiny.

“This is the next logical step rather than just relying on commodity markets and the price we can receive from the market at large,” Truttman said.

James Robson, chief executive officer of the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board, says farmers should look at grazing but it probably isn’t for every farmer.

“If (the farmer has) the type of operation that allows for grazing or any farmer that is currently grazing, needs to look at how their milk is being used,” Robson said. “If they are not involved in some way of utilizing that grass-based milk to develop a value added product they certainly need to look at that and possibly change the market for their milk.”

Robson believes these cooperative methods are good for the state and it’s a good situation when it works both for the farmers and the cheese makers.

“It shows Wisconsin continues to innovate and keep our farms in business and make a point of difference for the cheeses we market.”

Marketing

Products from grass-feed cows are said to be considerably higher in conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) than dairy products from conventionally fed cattle, according to Truttman.

Studies have also found that grass-fed cows produce higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids, which are believed to be beneficial to the heart and body (for more information, please see *Milk From Cows Raised Entirely On Pasture Has Higher Levels of Beneficial Fats: Study*, on page 11 of our March 10th issue).

Yet, the cooperative believes flavor may be their biggest selling tool.

“What is going to bring in the consumer is the taste. Once we get people to buy it one time we’ll have repeat sales.”

Workman described the flavor of grass-based cheese as an enhanced, distinct flavor with a better mouthfeel. “It’s like night and day,” he said.

Dan Truttman agrees and believes grass-based milk offers a better tasting cheese, different than anything else currently on the market.

“We think the consumer will be able to see and taste the difference that grass-based milk offers,” Truttman said.

Truttman believes that the consumer the co-op is targeting wants to know the story behind the cheese. “They want to know how the farms are operated. Are the cows treated humanely? Are they environmentally conscience?”

Robson said he believes consumers are becoming more interested in grass-fed dairy products, for some of the health benefits and the unique flavors. “We can market this product as a value added product with a point of difference in terms of taste and health benefits,” Robson said.

Workman believes grass-based cheese is a wonderful niche product. “It will be in step with organics. It will have all the benefits you get with organic, without all the expense.”

The co-op is shooting for an eight-month grazing season. The milk will be co-mingled during the winter. Paris hopes about 70 percent of the milk will be sold as grass-fed, with the other 30 percent to be co-mingled.

“When they approached me I was a little hesitant because there was a lot of sweat equity in this facility. But when you think about it, it’s a great marriage and I look forward to a lot of years here,” Workman said.

Wideman grew up on a farm and thought he knew a lot about farming. “These guys are doing things in a very interesting way. And it makes a lot of sense when it comes to the added value of the product and the health benefits in general. It’s a great idea and we like to be in front of great ideas.” •

Innovative Fiberglass Solutions for the Cheese Industry

- Brining Systems • Fiberglass Tanks
- Clean & Sanitary Rooms •
- Spray Systems • Refurbish and Repairs
- Solutions through Fiberglass

1933 Cofrin Dr., Green Bay, WI 54302
920-468-6261 • 920-468-0836
E-mail: glowacki@usxchange.net

FIBERGLASS SOLUTIONS INC.

