

## Award-Winning Missouri Pasture-Based Dairy Starts Farmstead Cheese Business

**Purdy, MO**—Edgewood Dairy, an award-winning, pasture-based dairy operation here, opened its doors this summer to a new value-added farmstead cheese and bottled milk venture.

Owned and operated by the Fletcher family, Edgewood Dairy is an intensive, rotational grazing system situated on 260 acres in the Ozarks of southwest Missouri.

In 1997, the farm made the switch to pasture grazing. The rotational grazing system allows the cows to graze fresh pasture every 12 hours and as they rotate from paddock to paddock, it also allows the grass to replenish and grow.

The pasture-based dairy currently has a herd of 140 cows with space for more than 300 cows. It currently produces 4 million pounds of milk annually.

Edgewood Dairy was also named Innovative Dairy Farmer of the Year in 2008 by the International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA) and received the Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) Member of Distinction honor in 2012.

### Keeping It In The Family

The idea to launch a farmstead cheese company began in the summer of 2013 during a family vacation. Son Tyler Fletcher and his future wife, Aubrey, marketing executive for Edgewood Creamery, were set to graduate from college and get married.

“We knew once we graduated that we wanted to come back to the farm,” Aubrey Fletcher said. “Why not make a value-added product with our good milk?”

At that time, we simply planned on making cheese, Fletcher said. When we settled on having an on-farm retail store, we decided to sell fluid milk as well.

Head cheese maker Melissa Fletcher and her husband Charles then headed to Vermont for a six-day cheesemaking course led by cheese consultant Peter Dixon, followed by a cheese course in St. Louis, MO.

The Fletchers also toured and received advice from friends and colleagues at Sweet Grass Dairy of Thomasville, GA, and Homestead Creamery in Jamesport, MO.

“We definitely did our research and became educated in what we needed to do,” Fletcher said. “Of course, every day is a learning process.”

Construction on the 3,000 square-foot creamery kicked off in October 2014, and was completed last July. The processing facility, aging room and office are located in the same building as the on-farm retail store. Doors officially opened to the public Aug. 10.

The new creamery is capable of processing 1 million pounds of milk

per year. Now in its third month of operation, Edgewood Creamery is averaging about 18,000 pounds of milk per month – 8,000 pounds for fluid milk sales and the rest for cheesemaking.

“We definitely have the potential to use a lot more milk in a year,” said Aubrey Fletcher, marketing executive, Edgewood Creamery.

### Customer Base Called For More Fresh Cheeses

Edgewood Creamery makes several fresh cheeses, including Farmhouse Original, Plain Jane, Milk & Honey, seasonal Pumpkin Spice, and fresh cheese curds.

Aged cheeses are cloth-bound Edgewood Cheddar available in three-month, six-month and 12-month varieties, and Ozark Mountain Blue aged three to four months.

“Through the research we had done, we knew we wanted to make several fresh varieties – first, to get our capital going, and second – the area we live in doesn’t have a large amount of high income,” Fletcher said.

“We knew that aged cheeses wouldn’t have the best advantage in our store, and most of the demand would be for fresh cheeses,” she said. “We decided to make a majority of fresh cheeses, and offer several aged cheeses.”

“We decided on aged cheeses through the classes that Melissa and Charles took in Vermont. They decided those cheeses would be the best suited for our area,” Fletcher continued.

The creamery will make cheese year-round, and employs four full-time workers and one part-time employee.

The creamery sells its cheese on-site and through local retail markets.

“We do plan to expand into other high-end grocery stores in Springfield, MO, which is a more populated area,” Fletcher said. “Since we did just get started, that process is going slowly, but it will build.”

Through introduction to our new cheeses, Missouri residents are becoming more familiar with the artisan cheese movement, she said.

“A normal consumer would think that Cheddar needs to be orange, so we are eventually opening people up to see that there’s an art to cheesemaking rather than simply commercial,” she said. “People are really thrilled with what we’re doing, and we’re getting a lot of good feedback.”

One of the biggest start-up challenges was actually getting open, according to Fletcher.

“Building the facility was very difficult because there was nothing like our facility around here,” she

• See **Edgewood Dairy**, p. 23

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## City Of Plymouth, WI, Gets \$300,000 USDA Grant To Help Renovate Building For Start-Up Cheese-Themed Store, Heritage Center

Washington—The city of Plymouth, WI, and Plymouth Utilities has been awarded a \$300,000 grant from the US Department of Agriculture to help renovate a building for a start-up cheese-themed retail store and heritage center.

The grant, announced Monday by US Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, was part of the \$12.5 million in loan and grants for 39 projects that are intended to help rural businesses in 21 states in Puerto Rico.

The funding opportunity “is one piece of the puzzle to saving perhaps the oldest building in downtown Plymouth as well as building upon our history as ‘Cheese Capital of the World,’” commented Plymouth Mayor Donald Pohlman.

The USDA grant will establish a new business revolving loan fund (RLF) that will issue an initial 0 percent interest loan to the project at 133 E. Mill Street, a cheese-themed retail and heritage center, said Brian Yerges, Plymouth city administrator/utilities manager, who noted that the building was originally built in 1875.

The project is a collaboration of the Plymouth Redevelopment Authority (RDA), city of Plymouth, and the Sheboygan County Economic Development Corporation (SCEDC). The project is expected to be undertaken in 2016 contingent on funding.

The Plymouth RDA, chaired by Lee Gentine, previously announced that it had received an \$800,000 grant through the Lakeshore Community Foundation to support the project.

Plymouth has a long and rich history in the cheese industry. Plymouth at one time was home to, among other organizations, the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (which was based in Plymouth from 1943 until moving to Madison in 1962), the Wisconsin Cheese Exchange (which was formally organized in 1918, moved to Green Bay in 1956 and changed its name to the National Cheese Exchange in 1975), and the old “Farmers’ Call Board” (where cheese was also sold).

Today, Plymouth is home to Sargento Foods, Sartori Company and Masters Gallery Foods, and is also the home of a large Great Lakes Cheese cut and wrap operation. Dairy Farmers of America also operates a processed cheese plant in Plymouth, but recently announced that it plans to close the Plymouth plant early next year.

According to an essay written by Dan Buckman, Plymouth’s most distinctive feature in the 1930s and 1940s was an area of town known locally as Cheeseville, which included warehouses, cold storage, processing plants, and railroad facilities. It was home to cheese assemblers and cheese processors, and was the center in which cheese was collected, stored, cured, graded, packed and shipped.

Cheese makers would bring their cheese to Cheeseville where the assemblers would paraffin it, cure it, and store it, then sell the cheese to companies like Kraft (formerly Kraft-Phenix and Pabst-Ett), Borden, or Lakeshore-Marty (purchased by Borden in 1929), Buckman noted. Some of those assemblers were Blanke Cheese, Bamford Cheese, Davis Cheese, Plymouth Cheese, Conover Cheese, and Dairy State Cold Storage.

## Edgewood Dairy

Continued from p. 21

said. “We had to coach our builders on how it had to be done. We basically became builders as well, because we had to instruct them on how to do things.”

The other biggest obstacle was all the regulations for grade A fluid milk, Fletcher said.

“It is very taxing to get everything just so. There are a lot of hoops to jump through,” she said. “It’s not that you don’t hold yourself to the same standard with cheeses, because of course we do, but milk is just so much more taxing.”

For the grade A side of things, there are definitely more forms to fill out, many more regulations, and it really took us working side by side with the state milk board to really find a balance, Fletcher said.

“If you’re thinking about fluid milk, you need to be working side-by-side with your state inspector,” she said.

Over the next few years, Edgewood Creamery would like to see their products become more

regionally available, according to Fletcher.

“I would like to see us extend our reach, maybe even into a large grocery chain like Whole Foods,” she said. “Obviously, that would be further down the line.”



“We’re definitely wanting to push out wholesale-wise, and would love to be getting both our fluid milk and cheese into restaurants, and I’m working on several possibilities right now,” she said.

For more information, visit [www.edgewoodcreamery.com](http://www.edgewoodcreamery.com).

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