



Premium American Blue Cheese

Faribault Dairy Brings Blue Cheesemaking Back To The Famed Caves Of Faribault, MN

Faribault, MN—After laying vacant for almost 10 years, the sandstone aging caves of Faribault, MN, are operational once again and will house artisanal premium Blue cheese.

Founded in August 2001, the Faribault Dairy Company was estab-

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Dating Back To The Frontier

The chronicle of the Faribault cheese plant begins in the early settlement days of frontier Minnesota. The first cave was reportedly hollowed out of the bluffs in 1852.

The now-famous caves are self-supporting archways, attaining an average height of 20 feet and stretch for several city blocks in a grid network. A special "whitewash" is applied to the cave walls to maintain an impervious surface and enhance

the natural cleansing effect of the St. Peter sandstone. In 1936, Felix Frederickson purchased the site nestled between the bluffs and the Straight River to begin production of Blue cheese.

A trained food scientist, Frederickson was first introduced to Blue

cheese while touring in France's Roquefort caves.

His goal was to produce an American Blue cheese that rivaled French Roquefort.

Frederickson sold the business in 1965 and the facility continued to produce Blue cheese until 1992. At shutdown, the plant was among the longest continuously operating dairy plants in the US.

About a decade later in January 2001, Jirik, Sherman and Ochs produced their first test vat of premium Blue cheese and the results, Jirik said, were extremely good. Over the next year, a business plan was developed to ensure financial preservation, equipment was purchased and five full-time employees were hired. Three part-time workers also joined the staff.

The building itself – a 25,000 square-foot facility connecting to 300,000 cubic square-foot underground – was structurally sound, Jirik said. Renovation of the production area included new USDA-approved floors and ceilings with cutting-edge handling systems and lighting.

Jirik, Sherman and Ochs are well-acquainted with the facility, all having worked there previously. After graduating from St. John's University, Jirik was a certified dairy lab technician in the quality assurance department at Faribault's cheese plant. In 1991, he became plant manager of the facility.

Sherman began working at the plant in 1980 and gained experience in all areas of operation. In 1987, he was promoted to production supervisor, and then in 1991 he oversaw the packaging operation as well. Ochs began his career at the Blue cheese plant in 1985 and by 1991, he oversaw all packaging, production, and facility maintenance operations.

"We have 30 years of combined experience making Blue cheese," Sherman said. "We're all former employees of the cheese caves."

Howard Morris, food science professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota and a longtime Blue cheese researcher and industry consultant, began a consulting relationship with Frederickson back in 1943. He continued to provide consultation for the new owners when Frederickson sold the company, and provides expert consultation for Faribault Dairy Company today.

At present, Faribault Dairy is fully licensed and produces cheese one or two days a week. It is expected to manufacture roughly 350,000 pounds of its Amablu this year, with anticipated future growth.

The facility has the capacity to produce over 10 million pounds of cheese annually, Jirik said.

The company sources its whole milk from local cooperatives on the open market. It is not yet associated with one particular affiliate, but Jirik said they will insist on buying milk locally.

Faribault follows a traditional method using no additives to make its cheese. Government regulations require Blue cheese to be aged a minimum of 60 days; Faribault Dairy ages its Blue for about 100 days, depending on flavor development, to achieve a piquant, sharp taste.

Amablu is produced primarily for high-end retail and foodservice mar-

kets. It will be available for sale regionally this May, and nationally within a year.

With the help of Jeff LaBeau, member of Faribault's board of advisors and winner of the 2001 Chef of the Year Award from the Minneapolis Chapter of the American Culinary Foundation, the company also plans to benefit from one of this year's biggest restaurant trends – cheese.

Local residents of Faribault, MN, have also come out en masse to pledge support of the new company and are thrilled the caves are operational once again.

"We've had tremendous community support," Jirik said. "We've already had locals coming in to order cheese. It's pretty heartwarming."

Competition? Great!

Regarding competition from other Blue cheese manufacturers in the Midwest and across the nation, the Faribault Dairy team possess a confidence that comes with the manufacture of a premium product.

"We enjoy competition and think it's vital to the market," Jirik said. "We want to delight our customers. That's what we've successfully done."

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He likened competition among Blue cheese manufacturers to California's wine industry, noting that a little friendly rivalry does nothing but strengthen the market.

"As long as everyone has high standards, it will work," Jirik said.

When asked what purpose each man would like to achieve from this venture, Jirik, Sherman and Ochs gave distinct answers that were consistent with the same theme – to be the best.

"To maintain a historical facility and manufacture premium cheese, while incorporating new technologies to improve operations," Ochs said.

"I just want to add that I'm enjoying the challenge of the opportunity to bring this product to the people again and to have it happen in our home town," Jirik said.

"I also have to admit that I enjoy competition on a world scale," he continued.

"To be recognized as the world leader in the production of premium Blue cheese," Sherman said. "We should be selling to 25 percent of the retail/foodservice market within five years."

"I'd also like to get home for dinner at night a couple times a week," he added. •

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