



After More Than Two Years Of Preparation, Golden Ridge Co-op Enters Blue Cheese Market

Cresco, IA—After years of supplying milk to other manufacturers, the Golden Ridge Cheese Cooperative is now making its own Blue cheese using principles and techniques that reflect a pure and industrious heritage.

Owned by a 40-member group of Amish dairy farmers, the co-op is headquartered about one mile from the Iowa-Minnesota border in Cresco, IA.

This local consortium has a long tradition of producing milk, having previously supplied creameries in both Lanesboro, MN, and Granger, MN.

Preparations for the endeavor began almost three-and-a-half years

ago. After an initial evaluation, the group shopped out for pricing, drafted a business plan and eventually received a USDA loan guarantee.

they didn't have to send their milk away," McNaughton said. Co-op members from Minnesota and Iowa milk their cows by hand and ship it in traditional cans to the plant. The cows are grazed on pasture for as long as the weather permits and housed for the balance of the year, receiving hay and feeds produced on the farms.

A portion of the Golden Ridge cheese will leave the factory sporting the sticker "Made With Natural Milk."

Known for their stewardship of the land and their practice of sustainable agriculture, the Amish cooperative has committed to not using artificial growth hormones,

certain fertilizers, genetically modified feed or pesticides.

All the milk used by the company is pasteurized.

"In the state of Iowa, you can make cheese using raw milk if you have a historical record of making cheese with raw milk. We were not permitted to use raw milk," McNaughton said.

"When cheese makers do a good job with raw milk, they have an opportunity to create the best products possible," he continued.

Under the "Schwarz und Weiß" brand (translated as "Black and White" – symbolic of the Amish community's simple approach to life), the Golden Ridge family of Blue cheeses includes a standard single cream, natural rind variety available in a 5-pound wheel.

Plans are in the works for a high-fat, triple cream Blue with a natural rind called Harmony Blue in a 2-pound wheel.

"Its a soft entry into the Blue cheese sector because it's not as pronounced; it's not so strong and it's about texture," McNaughton said.

Donna Doel, former owner of Doeling Dairy in Fayetteville, AK, has been hired as head cheese maker.

"She's turning out to be a very good cheese maker and has really embraced what we're trying to do. This as a concept to her is very much

in the mindset of 'this is not mega-cheese; this is cheese that needs to be loved.' It has a real reason to exist," McNaughton said.

Right now, there are eight full-time employees, but McNaughton anticipates adding 12 more when "the place starts running hard" in about 18 months.

"We just face now a phenomenal challenge to get enough cheese sold to keep the place operating," McNaughton said.

With its buttery texture and subtle flavor, Golden Ridge cheese is similar to Cabrales or Spanish Blue cheese, McNaughton explained.

"We want our cheese to be more European in style. If you go to France, you get these beautiful, soft, creamy cheeses," he said.

"It's largely this kind of thought process and technology that goes on here," he said.

"I give a lot of the credit here to the flora, like a Camembert or Brie-type situation. But people don't think to apply that to a Blue. The French do it all the time," McNaughton said.

Plenty Of Room In The Market

Despite a number of Blue cheese companies already operating in the area – Swiss Valley Farms in Mindoro, WI; Faribault Cheese Co. in Faribault, MN; and the well-recognized Maytag Blue Cheese Company in Newton, IA – members of Golden Ridge are adamant that the Blue cheese market is far from saturated and their cheese fills a singular niche.

"We're small, which is attractive for everyone. There's 20 of us fighting for 10 percent of the market," McNaughton said. "We wouldn't have to go head-to-head with anyone. We can find our own place in the market."

Golden Ridge remains confident that consumers will endorse its remarkable product and is fairly breezy about competition from heavy-hitting Blue cheese maker Maytag, to which it seems all Blue cheese is compared.

"You know the concept of 'It only takes one extra pound in the marketplace to reduce the value of the mar-

ketplace.' Maytag doesn't have that extra pound of cheese," McNaughton said.

"Then you get some strokes from someone like Emeril on TV who raves about Maytag Blue and all of a sudden this is a benchmark product and where everyone wants to be," he continued.

"We too would like to get endorsements from Emeril," he said.

The cooperative's specialty cheese broker, Intermark Ltd. of Minneapolis, requested a cheese that will fit in that category.

Golden Ridge cheese will modestly retail nationwide for about \$7 per pound.

After more than two years of prep work, the co-op is set to face the daily hurdles that spring up for anyone embarking on a cheese business.

"Our challenge now is to deliver consistency and quality," McNaughton said. "And volume."

"There won't be any limitations on where you might find this cheese," McNaughton said. "Anywhere that you might find a Maytag Blue, we would love to have our Blue. But we're definitely focused on table cheese quality as opposed to salad or foodservice quality."

"We would be honored to be sold alongside Maytag," McNaughton said.

The company website – www.goldenridgecheese.com – will be operational mid-January.

For more information on Blue cheese from Golden Ridge Cooperative, contact Chuck Jensen, Intermark, Ltd., at (952) 854-7166. •

