



Gunn's Hill Brings Swiss Mountain Cheeses To Ontario; Navigates Canada's Supply Management System To Become Licensed

Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese will launch production of three unique Mountain-style washed-rind cheese varieties this summer after three years of planning, testing and working to comply with Canada's regulations for new cheese makers.

Owned and operated by Ontario native Shep Ysselstein, Gunn's Hill passed its final dairy plant inspection just this week and once the paperwork goes through, the company will be in production.

The cheese factory is directly adjacent to Ysselstein's three-generation family farm in Woodstock, Ontario.

Growing up in the dairy industry, Ysselstein began thinking about a career in cheesemaking at university.

While studying business at Dordt College in Sioux Center, IA, Ysselstein made a pilgrimage to Thunder Oak Cheese Farm in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

"They showed us around and I thought it was fantastic," Ysselstein said. "That's what started my thought process."

Post graduation, Ysselstein returned home in 2004 to his family's dairy farm in Woodstock.

"People want variety. They don't want to be eating the same cheeses every time at parties."

Shep Ysselstein,
Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese

"I was getting tired of milking cows all the time," Ysselstein said. "At first, I was ready to go and build a cheese factory right away. And then I realized I knew nothing of cheesemaking."

That's when I began my journey on how to make cheese, he said.

That journey included taking courses at the University of Guelph, the University of Vermont's Institute for Artisan Cheese (VIAC), and an internship at Bronson Hill Cheesery in New York state's Finger Lakes region.

Ysselstein also journeyed to the Canton of Bern in Switzerland during the summer of 2008 for four months, where he helped milk

roughly 30 cows both morning and night, and made traditional Mountain cheese in between.

"We made cheese the same way they had been doing it for 500 years, with a big copper cheese kettle on top of a fire – very little automation," Ysselstein said.

"It was an amazing experience, because it's hands-on; it's all about how it feels and how it tastes," he continued.

In spring 2009, Ysselstein felt ready to start his own cheesemaking venture. It took from then until December 2010 to acquire permits, handle paperwork and design the facility.

"It was basically a period of planning," he said.

In Canada, we have a quota system for milk, Ysselstein explained. Each farmer has a quota on how much milk they're allowed to produce and likewise, each cheese plant has a quota on how much milk they're allowed to buy to make cheese.

"This is more or less to maintain a reasonable price for the farmers and to keep it somewhat consistent," Ysselstein said.

Because of Canada's supply management system, Gunn's Hill has set cheeses the company is allowed to manufacture.

Ysselstein applied to make three artisan cheeses, and a committee ruled them to be "unique to Canada" and similar to the styles Ysselstein learned to make abroad.

"This is just for cow's milk; goat's milk or sheep's milk – that's wide open," Ysselstein said.

"If the committee said 'no,' you could go back and change the description of the cheese and hopefully, they would say 'yes' the next time," he said.

There's also a fallback with Dairy Farmers of Ontario, which has an artisan cheese program in place called the Innovative Product Program, which allows a specific amount of milk for artisan cheese.

"There's drawbacks for people getting started, but at the same time, it benefits farmers in terms of getting a consistent price to make a living," Ysselstein said.

In the end, it supports small farms because in Ontario, farm sizes are smaller than elsewhere, he said.

Gunn's Hill Hard Cheese is modeled after Swiss Mountain cheese with a washed rind and rich, salty taste. The Firm Cheese is a combination of Appenzeller and Gouda, with a creamy, nutty taste and aroma. The Semi-Soft Cheese is modeled after a little-known Swiss cheese called Mutchli, with a sweet taste and flexible texture.

For those looking to start their own farmstead cheese operation, Ysselstein said it's most helpful to know someone who's already gone through it and willing to share tips and ideas.

"I lost a lot of time because I didn't know all the regulatory hurdles, and I should have set things up in a different order," Ysselstein said. "I



Gunn's Hill's 6,000 square-foot cheese factory includes a retail outlet, and the plant is designed for visitors to view the production area. Ysselstein purchased a used 300-gallon cheese vat out of Wisconsin, and a number of new pieces of equipment like his cheese press directly from Holland.

Ultimately, Ysselstein said he would like to process about 158,000 gallons of milk per year – about one batch of cheese daily.

Cheese will be sold on-site and direct to consumers through farmers' markets in a 100-mile radius, including Toronto, and through a distributor to restaurants and retailers in nearby larger cities.

Currently, Ysselstein is handling operations pretty much on his own, with occasional help from his family.

"I plan to start out on my own and when I run out of hours in the day, I'll look at hiring," he said. "And if I'm stuck right away, I can always go to the farm and steal my brother for a few hours."

If I get to full capacity someday – similar to the factory where I worked in British Columbia – I'll employ about 10 people, he said.

know now how long one thing takes versus another thing."

He also suggested visiting similar cheese plants and talking with owners about their design process – specifically, features they like and plans that didn't turn out as expected.

"Find good people to listen to," he said. "Lots of people will tell you just about anything to sell their product, but there are companies and salesmen out there that will offer good advice, based on what's best for you."

I had a food safety design consultant come in and help, too, Ysselstein said. In the end, that made a big difference.

In Ontario, there's not nearly enough specialty cheese manufacturers, according to Ysselstein. The demand well outstrips the supply.

"We're quite far behind New York or Vermont or Quebec or Pennsylvania in terms of artisan cheese," he said. "People want variety. They don't want to be eating the same cheeses every time at parties."

For more information on Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese, contact Shep Ysselstein via email: shep@gunnshillcheese.ca. 