

## After A Year Under New Ownership, Heritage Cheese Looks For More Local Milk Suppliers

Heuvelton, NY—Just over one year after an Amish trust took over ownership of the former Heritage Cheese House, the New York Cheddar manufacturer is looking for more milk suppliers and thinking of expanding its cheese line.

Heritage Cheese House was established in 1995 by previous owner David H. O'Neil, Jr., after farmers were dropped by Plumbrook Amish Farms, a Norfolk cheese maker.

In July 2006, O'Neil made the decision to suspend milk pickups to 95 Amish farms and cheese production because the company wasn't getting enough money for cheese on the retail market to stay competitive, O'Neil said.

Amish milk suppliers were left without a place to ship their milk, said Stephanie LaShomb, sales and marketing manager for Heritage Cheese.

The company is now owned by Heuvelton Community Irrevocable Trust, a not-for-profit trust of members formed from an Amish community. It is against Amish religion to outright own and operate a company,

so the committee pooled its money and commissioned three English trustees and three members from the Amish community to run the business.

Ron Kiah serves as plant manager, overseeing the 7,000-square-foot facility that employs 17 workers.

Three people have been hired to make cheese, including head cheese maker Del Petrie. Although the cheese plant is owned by an Amish trust, no one from the Amish community works at the facility.

Heritage Cheese curd is made exclusively from locally-produced Amish milk. Supply is down right now because of the season, LaShomb said. Cows are beginning to freshen, so we obviously can't accept that milk. Supplier numbers have decreased to about 75 farms, she said.

For upgrades, Heritage Cheese last summer installed a chiller to cool the milk before being transferred to a holding tank.

Cheese is made year-round, six days a week – between 700 to 1,500 pounds of cheese daily.

Heritage Cheese manufactures its New York Cheddar primarily for retail sales; it also sells to larger companies that buy truckloads of cheese,

LaShomb said. Additionally, the company is looking to experiment with making cheese other than Cheddar.

Our cheese is a locally-made, natural product, LaShomb said. It's not organic, but it's all-natural. While plans to make a conversion to organic production aren't in the near future, they remain in the back of our minds, she continued.

**"We're trying to sell our blocks and actually, it's pretty tough. If we had all the milk we needed, we could sell up to three tractor-trailer loads a month..."**

– Ron Kiah,  
Heritage Cheese

The company has a retail storefront at its Heuvelton facility where it sells cheese and other Amish-manufactured products.

Marketed under the "Heritage Cheese" brand (formerly "Heritage Cheese House"), the company's line of products is also available at local grocery stores and community co-ops throughout New York State.

Our cheese is made the old-fashioned way, LaShomb said. We're not a mass-production plant, and everything is hand-cut.

"Our employees really take a lot of pride in our product," she continued.

Since the trust was established just over a year ago, the biggest hurdle for the company has been milk production, LaShomb said.

"We could always use more milk," she said. I'm sure most New York State cheese plants have their struggles, Kiah said. Right this minute, I can't see an increase in consumer demand for cheese.

"We're trying to sell our blocks and actually, it's pretty tough," Kiah said. "If we had all the milk we needed, we could sell up to three tractor-trailer loads a month – but we couldn't make it that fast."

"We could get rid of a trailer-load a month, probably, if we had the milk supply," he continued.

The possibility of future expansion has been discussed, LaShomb added.

"If we're able to receive more milk, we could add personnel," she said.

While Heritage Cheese is open to the idea of buying milk from suppliers other than Amish, LaShomb said the company still won't accept milk from cows treated with synthetic bovine growth hormone.

Over the next five years, Kiah said he would like to see an eventual overhaul of the facility, with upgraded equipment. But Heritage Cheese has a great team of workers and if it wasn't for them, the company wouldn't be here, he continued.

For more details, contact Heritage Cheese at (315) 344-2216. Orders can be faxed to (315) 323-0950. •

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