



Trained In Vermont & Ireland, Cheese Maker Keeley McGarr Brings Farmstead Cheesemaking To NYS Finger Lakes Region

King Ferry, NY—A new farmstead cheese company will kick off this month, bringing with it more awareness of New York state's growing artisan cheese industry.

Keeley McGarr, owner and operator of Keeley Cheese Co. at McGarr Farms, will celebrate her company's grand opening this month after years of training and preparation.

McGarr is a 2005 graduate of the University of Vermont with a degree in animal science. While in Vermont, she landed a work-study job at Shelburne Farms, where she began her career making Shelburne Farms' Cheddar for a semester.

"Basically, from there I was hooked and I've been doing it ever since," McGarr said.

That job taught me what I could bring home to our family farm, she said.

After graduation, McGarr attended classes at the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese (VIAC), participated in the Pennsylvania Sustainable Ag Conference last spring, and organized a three-month cheesemaking trip abroad to Ireland.

In fall of 2008, McGarr secured an internship at fifth generation Gubbeen Farm of West Cork, owned by Tom and Giana Ferguson.

"Giana was one of the first farmstead cheese makers to start the farmstead tradition back up in Ireland during the late 1970s," McGarr said.

Under Ferguson's guidance, McGarr learned to make washed rind styles in the tradition of Muenster, Tallegio and Brick.

"That's how I decided I wanted to make washed-rind cheese," she said.

Back home, McGarr initially wanted to construct a new facility on the family farm but quickly realized how overwhelmingly cost-prohibitive the project would be.

"Then I started looking at remodeling one of the buildings at the farm and decided that would be a lot eas-

ier to start out; I can always grow into something bigger," she said.

"Right now, I want to use as little extra energy as possible, and work with the land as much as we can," McGarr continued.

Renovations began early last summer, including construction of an underground cellar which serves as a

younger, pasteurized washed rind version, and a wine-soaked, pasteurized variety.

"We're in the middle of the wine region here, and we're partnering with a winery down the road," McGarr said.

Cheeses will be available at local wineries and restaurants around the

McGarr said she underestimated exactly how long the loan process would take to complete.

"I was thinking I'd just go to the bank, give them the plan, they would think it was amazing and give me a loan," she said. "But it took a lot more work. Luckily, I had done business planning in college, so I had a bit of a clue on how big a pain that can be."

Once McGarr thought her budget was set and she was able to order her vat, she had another wait to endure.

"It was kind of the same thing. I thought, 'Oh, it'll be here in a month.' Two and a half, almost three months later it finally shows up," she said. "For me, it was difficult coordinating the timing and get it all going at once."

But everything's here now and we're finally ready to get going, she continued.

McGarr and the rest of New York state's artisan cheese makers are working to establish their state as a gourmet tourist destination and giving nearby Vermont a run for its money.

While going to school in Vermont, I saw tons of artisan cheese makers and farmstead cheese companies, McGarr said.



Newly-minted farmstead cheese owner Keeley McGarr gets her hands dirty during the renovation process with help from her father, Dan McGarr, former president of the New York Holstein Association and an international dairy show judge. Keeley Cheese Co. opens this month, bringing washed rind artisan cheese to New York state's Finger Lakes region.

cheese cave. McGarr purchased a reconditioned 200-gallon dual vat for manufacturing.

"I wanted to get a dual vat because I want to make some fresher cheeses, but will also be making some raw milk varieties," she said. "Right now, it's a one-person operation."

McGarr Farms milks 175 Holstein and Jersey cows, grazing the herd about six months out of the year. McGarr said she basically takes milk directly from the pipeline, and brings it to the cheese house in intermediate bulk containers.

To start, McGarr will make three variations of washed rind cheeses – a raw milk variety similar to one she experimented with last fall; a

Finger Lakes region, as well as the Ithaca Farmers' Market and other regional farmers' markets, and a small on-site retail store. And soon McGarr will sell her cheese online at www.keeleyscheeseco.com.

Plans call for a full batch of cheese twice each week, totaling about 350 pounds of cheese.

Currently, McGarr serves as the sole cheese maker, with help from her family and boyfriend.

"By the end of the year, I'll probably need to hire someone on to help with some aspects of the business, because making it and selling it and marketing it is quite a bit to take on," she said.

As far as unexpected hurdles,

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—Keeley McGarr,
Keeley Cheese Co

"They've organized themselves very well, with maps for tourists and cheese trails," she said. "New York is just starting to get there."

There are people who have been making cheese for a long time here, but not in such numbers as Vermont, McGarr said.

She recently joined the board of the New York State Cheese Makers Guild, and in working with fellow artisan cheese makers over the past year, has discovered tremendous camaraderie among local businesses.

"Everyone's ready to lend a hand," she said. "There's still a sense of the artisan cheese movement as 'up and coming'."

The guild is in the process of organizing a Finger Lakes cheese trail to compliment the existing wine trails, McGarr said. It's something people are really buzzing about.

For more details, contact Keeley McGarr at (315) 730-6872 or visit www.keeleyscheeseco.com. r

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