

Faribault Alum Brings Cheesemaking To Urban Minneapolis With The Lone Grazer

Minneapolis, MN—Faribault Dairy alumnus Rueben Nilsson is heading up a new urban cheese-making operation here in the heart of one of the city's most up-and-coming neighborhoods.

Rueben Nilsson, former cheese maker with Faribault Dairy, Faribault, MN, is head cheese maker and co-owner at Lone Grazer Creamery, located in artistic and trendy northeast Minneapolis.

The Lone Grazer Creamery and Red Table Meat Co. are both located in The Food Building – an urban food production hub in co-owned by Kieran Folliard and Mike Phillips.

“More and more, consumers want to know about their food,” Folliard added. “We’re able to tell them a very short but impactful story.”

—Rueben Nilsson,
Lone Grazer

A family tie to the genesis of Lone Grazer lies in whiskey. In the 1990s, Kieran Folliard created 2 Gingers Irish Whiskey, which was eventually added to Jim Beam's Irish Whiskey portfolio circa 2013.

Those from the 2 Gingers Irish Whiskey team eventually repurposed The Food Building to establish a creamery and charcuterie.

“We wanted to partner with early-stage food entrepreneurs who are ready to launch a business,

but need a bit of space or ‘back of house’ support that we provide,” said Seamus Folliard, sales director, Lone Grazer.

I was then introduced to Keith Adams of Alemar Cheese (see www.cheesereporter.com/archive/AlemaCheese.pdf) in Mankato, MN, who was a great resource and support, Folliard said.

It was Alemar's Adams who hooked up Folliard with Rueben Nilsson from Faribault Dairy.

“I had been at Faribault close to seven years,” Nilsson said. “That's where I learned to make cheese, and Jeff (Jirik) was a great teacher.”

“Over the last year or so, I started thinking about what kind of cheese I'd like to make, because pretty much all the cheese at Faribault is great Blue cheese,” he said.

“After talking with Keith and some other people at ACS, I was ready to strike out on my own. Keith put me in contact with Seamus and Kieran, and we talked about some of the opportunities available in the city,” he said.

I thought I had some cheeses in me that needed to get made, Nilsson said. I left Faribault in February of 2014, and started making cheese at Lone Grazer about one year later.

The Food Building, originally constructed in 1907, is roughly 25,000 square feet, and the creamery occupies 4,500 square feet, including a receiving bay, production room and curing space.

Over the course of roughly one year, the team purchased a combination of new and used equipment, including new vat pasteurizers and new equipment for the environmental control cure space.



Headquartered in trendy northeast Minneapolis, The Lone Grazer production facility is housed in The Food Building - a hub for producers, cheese mongers and the public to gather and witness the manufacturing process and talk directly to cheese makers.

The group also had to follow strict city regulations regarding proper exiting routes, and change the zoning from a residential property to a commercial one.

“The neighborhood association was a great supporter,” Folliard added. “The city of Minneapolis was also great to work with. They want to see more of the kind of things we're doing.”

The first test batch of Nilsson's washed-rind recipe was made in June 2014 at the University of Minnesota pilot plant using cans of bottled milk from nearby Cedar Summit Farms.

“I figured out some of the things I'd done wrong pretty early on, but then I started making cheese here at the plant in mid-February, and we sold our first batch of cheese curds on February 27,” Nilsson continued.

Lone Grazer currently makes washed rind cheeses, String cheese and fresh cheese curds, with a few aged cheeses in the pipeline.

Crowd favorite Hansom Cab has a firmer paste similar to a Cheddar texture, and is washed with 2

Gingers Irish Whiskey and smoky Lapsang Souchong tea.

“I like the balance there,” Nilsson said. “I really want to do rinds that are edible and approachable.”

The other washed rind is Grazier's Edge, which is washed with St. Paul's own 11 Wells Rye Whiskey. This cheese has a softer, buttery texture, Nilsson said.

“We're big on collaboration here,” Seamus Folliard said. “We work with a lot of different food producers, brewers, and restaurants – anything we can tie together. The whey from our cheese make goes to feed Mike's pig farmers, for example.”

Hansom Cab and Grazier's Edge account for roughly half of total cheese production.

Lone Grazer buys its milk from Sunrise Meadows Dairy Farm in Cokato, MN, and Stengaard Farm in Sebeka, MN. Using pasture-based milk, production varies according to season. Right now, the company is running between 10,000 to 15,000 pounds of milk per week.

Cheese is sold at Minnesota-area groceries like Hy-Vee, Kowalski's, Lunds & Byerly's and Oxdale's Markets, specialty grocers, Fromagination and Metcalfe's Markets in Madison, and most recently, Murray's Cheese in New York.

“We're just finishing up conversations with a distributor in Chicago and one in Southern California,” Seamus Folliard said. “A local distributor is going to be doing some out-of-state and regional deliveries to Iowa, Wisconsin and the Dakotas, and we'll continue to do self-distribution in the metro area.”

“We've pretty much saturated this market, so we need to start popping up in some new places,” he continued.

Challenges, Advantages Of Urban Cheesemaking

The advantage of making cheese in the city is the proximity to consumers, cheese mongers and nearby restaurants, Nilsson said. However, it costs much more to maintain a

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The Lone Grazer

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production facility in Minneapolis than it would in the country.

"It's an actual investment to be able to have those conversations with folks here in town," Nilsson said.

"More and more, consumers want to know about their food," Folliard added. "We're able to tell them a very short but impactful story."

"Food Building is not just a production center. We built this as a gathering place for people to come and actually watch the process. That's a great advantage," he said.

Along with Nilsson, the Lone Grazer has four full-time assistant cheese makers, a part-time quality control manager, part-time office manager, and a rotating group of college interns.

A staff of about six with Food Building is in charge of accounting, human resources and other "back-of-house" responsibilities.

Communication With Cheese Makers Is Key For Starting Out

Over the years, what really cemented the idea that I wanted to be a cheese maker was the great specialty cheesemaking community, Nilsson said.

"From Jeff Jirik, Bruce Workman, Jeff Wideman, and Katie Hedrich – just a number of people with so many years of cheesemaking experience," he said.

"Even the more recent cheese makers like to pay it forward and help the newcomers," Nilsson said. "That's the great thing about ACS

every year. You're there for four days surrounded by people who are as obsessed about cheese as you."

The biggest challenge getting started, though, was "taking that first big drink of milk," Nilsson said. "We needed to hit the ground running. We bought milk from the farm, and now we had to do something with it."

"It's a two-way commitment," Folliard added. "The farmers know us and we know them. We wanted to make sure they were being appropriately compensated for the hard work making such fantastic milk."

"The reason they partnered with us was because they wanted to see their product. They didn't want to join an anonymous co-op. They can hold this cheese in their hand and say 'This is the fruit of our labor,'" Folliard said.

As for customers, the overwhelming majority realize that small farms and small producers equal quality product and a premium price, Nilsson said.

"Still, at every tasting you get one guy who's like 'Grass-fed milk is the same as any other milk. You're a huckster – you're a con man,'" he said.

"It really does help that you're out there, putting a piece of cheese in their hand that they're going to eat right away, and hopefully they will see and taste the value of it," Nilsson said.

"And for every crazy guy, there's nine other people ready to take that cheese home," Folliard mentioned.

For more information, visit www.thelonegrazer.com.



At \$1.08 Billion, Milk Is The Top Farm Product In Terms Of Organic Sales: Leading States Are California, Wisconsin, New York

Washington—Some 14,093 certified and exempt organic farms in the US sold a total of \$5.5 billion in organic products in 2014, up 72 percent since 2008, according to the 2014 Organic Survey, which was released last month by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS).

This is the third organic production and practices survey NASS has conducted on the national level; the previous data collection efforts were the 2011 Certified Organic Production Survey and the 2008 Organic Production Survey.

The new survey follows the 2012 Census of Agriculture, which reported that total organic product sales by farms in the US increased 83 percent between 2007 and 2012. The 2014 Organic Survey results reflect the industry as of the time the list was built and the 2014 production year.

In 2014, the top five commodities in organic sales, according to the survey, were: milk, \$1.08 billion; eggs, \$420 million; broiler chickens, \$372 million; lettuce, \$264 million; and apples, \$250 million.

The survey found that there were 2,262 certified and exempt organic farms with milk cows in 2014. The National Organic Standard states that all farms and handling operations that display the "USDA Organic" seal must be certified organic to ensure that the National Organic standards are followed. Farms that follow the National Organic standards and have less than \$5,000 in annual sales can be exempt from certification.

Total organic milk production in 2014 was 3.4 billion pounds. Of that total, 3.39 billion pounds was sold as organic, at a total value of \$1.078 billion, while 17 million pounds was sold as conventional, with a value of \$3.9 million.

Leading states in terms of organic milk production last year were: California, 787.3 million pounds; Wisconsin, 357.2 million pounds; New York, 292.1 million pounds; Oregon, 292 million pounds; and Pennsylvania, 188.7 million pounds.

Wisconsin had the most organic farms with milk cows last year, 424, followed by New York, 393; Pennsylvania, 282; Ohio, 202; Vermont, 166; Indiana, 148; and Minnesota, 115.

There were 41 US farms that produced organic goat milk last year. Production totaled 2.2 million pounds, with a value of \$1.14 million.



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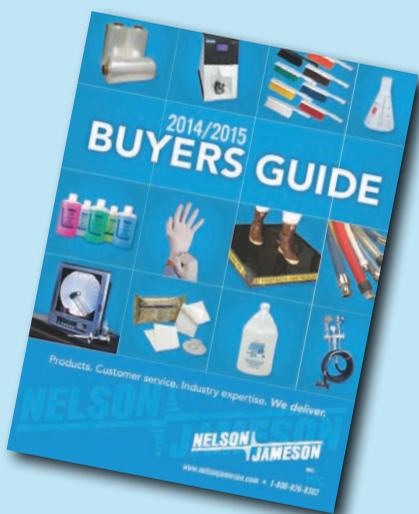
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