

Alaska's First Commercial Cheese Plant, Matanuska Creamery, Starts Making Cheddar

By Mike Comotto

Palmer, AK—Midway between Wasilla and Palmer, approximately 40 miles north of Anchorage, lies the first commercial cheese plant in the State of Alaska.

Towering mountains, huge glacier valleys, fish-filled rivers and lakes, abundant Alaska wildlife, glorious hiking country, scenic camping and quaint frontier communities is typically what the nearly 1 million visitors to the Valley come to see. Alaska, known for its salmon, huge mineral deposits and oil, will now house a complete creamery with the ability to manufacture cheese, fluid milk and ice cream.

In 2007, Kyle Beus and Robert Wells approached Karen Olson to help write a rural development grant requesting money from the US Department of Agriculture to help stabilize the dairy industry in Alaska. The three were granted the money and the Matanuska Creamery planning was in high gear.

Dairy cows have been part of the great Alaska landscape since 1914. But, it was not until March 27, 2008, the first commercial cheese plant opened its doors, christened its stain-

less steel milk lines and milled its first vat of Cheddar Cheese.

Was the cheese any good? We won't know for 60 days because it was manufactured with unpasteurized milk. However, the milk was delivered fresh from the dairy farm and all manufacturing targets were achieved.

In 1935, during the Great Depression, President Roosevelt located many families from the Midwest to Palmer to establish Alaska's first agricultural-based community. Currently, Palmer hosts the Alaska State Fair, which takes place in late August. Due to the extensive summer and long daylight hours, the valley farmers are capable of growing cabbage, corn, zucchini and squash at record setting weights.

One of these farmers is Robert Wells, one of Matanuska Creamery's principle owners. A vegetable produce farmer, Wells says his primary interest to get the dairy started was "to revitalize what was left of the dairy-based agriculture in the Mat-Su Valley after closure of the Matanuska Maid Dairy in late 2007." Wells worked at a dairy farm in 1977 and says "that cured me of any aspirations of actually owning or operat-



Matthew Lewis, Cheese and Laboratory Manager mills the first vat

ing a dairy farm."

Wells served as the agriculture director for the state of Alaska from 1997 to 2002. During his tenure Wells was instrumental in writing an agriculture appropriations bill targeted to revitalize the dairy industry.

It was thought that the farmers would take advantage of this money for expansion. The allocated money was not taken advantage of and during this time the dairy farms in Alaska dwindled from 10-12 to only six in 2008.

Four of these dairies are local, within the Mat-Su Valley. The Valley is home to about 400-600 cows and approximately 80,000 people.

Two other dairy farms are located north in Delta Junction, and supply the Northern Lights Dairy, primarily processing fluid milk.

Wells adds: "the previous creamery, in Anchorage, actually paid more to ship in milk from the lower 48 states than was paid to the local farmers" and feels this was one of the major contributing issues leading to both the creamery demise as well as the reduction in local milk production.

Both Karen Olson and Kyle Beus were dairy farmers. Both of them closed their dairies and are owners of the Matanuska Creamery. At one time, Olson ran a dairy farm of approximately 230 cows.

Asked if there is the potential or interest to grow in the Valley there was a resounding "yes" by all three owners. "If there is a fair return for the milk produced the Valley will grow." Beus said. "Right now there is more demand than production and that does not include the tourist season."

The objective of the new dairy is to produce high-end finished products and return to the farmers a price that will encourage growth.

In addition to being one of the principal owners in Matanuska Creamery, Beus owns and operates a restaurant in the town of Wasilla, AK, the commercial hub of the Mat-Su Valley and official home of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. Wasilla is the home of 5,100 people and the largest city in the Valley and claimed to be one of America's fastest growing cities.

Beus plans to convert part of his restaurant into an ice cream parlor and feature products manufactured

from the new dairy. "Although the plant has the capacity to process fluid milk, ice cream and cheese," Beus indicated, "the plant will follow the money, the best return on the product mix."

Beus said, "at this point there is no interest in marketing any cheese in the lower 48 states." Wells stated with a grin, "we hope to see a lot of the freight costs involved in dealing with the lower 48 to go home in suit-



Kyle Beus with the first commercial Cheddar made in Alaska

cases during tourist season."

Beus sees great opportunity for the community. "There are farmers out there with excess hay and barley, we have a couple of old dairies that could start-up and add 200-300 cows, the plant will employ 15-20 people, a lot of room to expand our local economy."

He added, "We ship most of our dairy products in and ship all of our money out; this expansion will help our local agricultural economy."

Why will this work? There are three owners that are very dedicated to the revitalization of the dairy industry in Alaska.

At one time Alaska produced about 36 million pounds of milk; today, output is only about one-eighth of that volume. All three are convinced that they will turn the industry in the right direction.

If you are in Alaska, look them up. The best time to travel to the beautiful Mat-Su Valley is May to September.

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