

Construction Underway For 2nd Point Reyes Cheese Plant, Featuring New Cooking School

Company Goes Greener, Starts Producing Organic Milk For Cheese Point Reyes Station, CA—Construction is about halfway complete on a new packaging, dry storage and aging plant at Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company here. The expansion also includes space for an educational facility/cooking school.

The company broke ground on the new 10,000-square-foot facility last fall and operations are slated to be online by late spring.

Point Reyes is moving its packaging operations to the new plant, along with additional walk-in cold storage and dry storage. It will also house administrative offices. The educational facility, with cooking school will feature Point Reyes Farmstead cheeses.

"This was going to be done a couple of years ago, but over time we revised our plans to add the educational center," said owner Bob Giacomini.

"We originally were only going to add about 7,000 square feet. We live just an hour north of San Francisco on Highway 1 – which runs from Mexico to the Canadian border – and we neighbor the Golden Gate National Seashore that draws about

three million tourists each year; they're only going to do so much hiking in the park, and they're begging for other things to do," Giacomini said.

"We've got high hopes for the educational center. It will accomplish two things – generate revenue and promote our cheese," he said.

The educational facility will host public groups interested in learning the "farm-to-table" process. Including a guest chef and seminar series, Point Reyes Farmstead will educate "agri-tourists" about its commitment to sustainability and the farmstead dairy as it relates to the changing landscape of agriculture in Northern California.

Due to the expansion, the company is hiring in both cheesemaking and operations.

"We've just totally outgrown the present building, so we are moving most of the functions, except for the make room, which will be expanded," Giacomini said.

"Once we move into the new facility, we are planning to make another style of cheese," Giacomini said.

Currently, Point Reyes Farmstead makes exclusively Original Blue

cheese – wheels, pre-wrapped wedges, crumbles and dressing. All cheese is kosher certified. Right now, the cheese company is only using about two-thirds of its milk supply from a closed herd of roughly 300 Holsteins.

Point Reyes Farmstead is also currently producing organic milk on the farm, but is not yet making organic cheese. Once the plant is up and running, the company plans on launching an organic Blue cheese.

"We don't envision getting too much bigger," Giacomini said. "Once we start using all of our milk, we could add a few more cows."

"Our core value is that we're a farmstead operation," said Jill Giacomini Basch, Bob's daughter and business partner. "While we are expanding our overall operation and efficiencies, we're bound by our milk supply."

We make all of our cheese by hand, Giacomini Basch continued. There will be no move towards automation.

The new educational facility will also help visitors understand what it means to be a "farmstead" cheese operation.

"A lot of consumers don't understand what 'farmstead' means – the fact that there is a value in total control of a product from the origin of the raw ingredient to the point of sale in the marketplace," Giacomini said.

"There's so much fear today about bioterrorism and mad cow disease, and when you're a farmstead, you pretty well eliminate those threats. We also consider ourselves very green," Giacomini said.

"The company is in the process of installing a methane digester to produce our own electricity and hot water on the farm, in conjunction with the new cheese plant," he continued.

Consumption, Competition For Blue Cheese Increased Over Seven Years

There's a lot of competition out there in the marketplace today, Giacomini said. Point Reyes Farmstead

Cheese began production of its Blue cheese in August 2000.

"When we first were in the business, there weren't that many people making Blue cheese – that's a main reason we went into Blue cheese. But there's more and more competition out there, and you have to make sure your quality is top rate and that you're competitive price-wise," he said.

"Farmstead' cheese costs so much more because production costs are higher and our company is smaller," Giacomini said. "On the other hand, you can't get too far out there."

Competition in the US Blue cheese market has definitely increased, Giacomini Basch agreed. However, there are very few farmstead Blue cheese brands sold nationally; Point Reyes Farmstead has a unique position in the market, and follows the movement towards natural, sustainable, locally produced cheese.

"I think Blue cheese consumption is going up somewhat nationally," Giacomini said. "We're in all the major markets of the country."

"We've got some holes in between yet to fill, but we've been making cheese for seven years now and have had pretty consistent growth of 15 to 25 percent annually," Giacomini said.

"Together with our marketing partners of distributors and retailers helping to promote our cheese, we hope to continue that growth pattern," Giacomini continued.

"Starting out, our core mission was to produce the country's premiere brand of artisan Blue cheese," Giacomini Basch said.

"We are constantly working towards that mission. Customers continually ask about the creation of a new cheese, and we've definitely had opportunities for diversification but first, we needed to establish credibility and brand loyalty for our primary product. We have to walk before we can run," she said. "We're a company that stays focused and keeps our eyes on the prize." •

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