

Saxon Homestead Creamery Fills Market Void With Unique Raw Milk Cheeses Similar To European Mountain Styles

Cleveland, WI—Wisconsin's newest farmstead cheese company has developed two original raw milk, pasture-based specialty cheeses made with old-world character, yet not reminiscent of any cheese currently on the market.

Saxon Homestead Creamery, headquartered here, has been 20 years in the making. It was primarily established to add value to the milk of longtime dairy farmer and company partner Gerald Heimerl.

We take considerable pride in our milk production, as most farmers do, Heimerl said. But it bothered him to see milk co-mingled, knowing that "your milk is only as good as the worst milk in the truck."

Before committing to cheese production, Heimerl investigated farmstead yogurt manufacture and bottled milk – both difficult markets to successfully infiltrate, he said.

"Cheese is a tough market also, but not as perishable as bottled milk or as tight competition-wise as yogurt," he observed.

Heimerl then took it upon himself

to learn everything about the specialty cheese market. However, back in 1988, the biggest challenge was figuring out what exactly "specialty cheese" was.

Information and guidance was provided through members of the American Cheese Society (ACS) – in particular, Dan Carter, founder of the Dairy Business Innovation Center (DBIC); industry consultant Neville McNaughton; and Dan Strongin, Edible Solutions.

Saxon Homestead Creamery was finally realized after four separate business plans. In 1992, Heimerl put together a feasibility analysis with help from an Agriculture Diversification and Development (ADD) grant, which proved the operation was not yet economically feasible.

But I just couldn't shake this dream, Heimerl said. With help from McNaughton, another business plan was created and submitted one month after Sept. 11, 2001.

"Our bankers said it was a good idea, but the timing wasn't right," Heimerl said.

In 2004, a third plan was written up, and shortly after, a fourth. By then, McNaughton and Strongin had joined the venture.

"Neville has the expertise and knowledge of working with milk from New Zealand that is grass-based, and that's important to us because our herd grazes every day possible," Heimerl said.

Initial aspirations were to make cheese for others to sell, and finding a good, committed partner was difficult, McNaughton said.

When a second attempt to get the cheese plant going failed, McNaughton said he would be interested in a partnership and a team was created, including Dan Strongin and Pat Knowles.

My proposal was to make cheese the market was lacking – varieties like European mountain cheeses, McNaughton said.

The uniqueness of the plant comes largely from the philosophy that this is a 100-year business – here for the generations that follow – and a true attempt at adding value to the effort of the farm, McNaughton said.

Many of the things McNaughton said he shares with his clients are embodied in the Saxon plant: a monolithic construction that is thermally efficient, with an HTST pasteurizer connected directly to the hot water set.

Vats are custom-made for quality outcome and ultimate batch control – just like wine makers have come to appreciate, McNaughton continued.

Regarding upgrades, we will try to fill demand for the first three products, add more aging space and install a skilled team trained in the plant, he said.

The 12,000 square-foot cheese-making facility, which includes 1,500 square feet of office space, was a former beer warehouse originally constructed in 1971. Obtaining necessary codes and permits took almost five months, and construction went on for another year. Saxon Creamery's first batch of cheese was made exactly one year after remodeling began.

We've also had the luxury of working with some great cheese makers – Raffaele Mascolo and Gerhard Hagenmueller, Heimerl said.

"These two cheese makers helped me get my license, and through that process I'm now the licensed cheese maker at the plant," he said.

Saxon Creamery is now making one vat per day, with help from three other plant personnel, five days a week. The creamery uses just 10 percent of its total milk supply for cheese production.

Our milk has been going to Baker Cheese Company, St. Cloud, WI, for

about 10 years and they're working with us very well – keeping us as a customer, yet supporting what we're trying to do. It's a great relationship, Heimerl said.

Unique Raw Milk Table Cheeses

By making exclusively raw milk cheese, we have the opportunity for our milk to express its many flavors, Heimerl said.

We modeled our cheeses on the idea of the "table cheese" – that compelling class of cheeses that can sit on the table at any meal, be an ingredient or a snack, or even the center of the plate, Strongin said.

"People who have worked with cheese for years jump for the Green Fields for its delicateness. Others jump to Big Ed's because it is sophisticated, yet friendly."

—Dan Strongin,
Edible Solutions

Big Ed's is most similar to a fresh Asiago and develops a unique sophistication as it ages, McNaughton said. It's not reminiscent of any cheese currently on the market, because the outcome is something of an unknown.

Green Fields was an attempt to make an old-world cheese – a genuine smear-ripened cheese that would resemble a true Monastery cheese, McNaughton continued.

It's a youngish, well-smear cheese aged 60 days that would partner well with wine – earthy and sophisticated, yet a little understated, he said.

Both varieties are popular among consumers, but Big Ed's has a more universal appeal, Strongin said.

"People who have worked with cheese for years jump for the Green Fields for its delicateness," he said. "Others jump to Big Ed's because it is sophisticated, yet friendly."

Both cheeses are now sold nationwide at independent markets and upscale chains, white table foodservice and lifestyle stores like Whole Foods Market.

'Over-Communicating' New Cheeses

To successfully market a new, unique cheese, Strongin said a company needs to "over-communicate."

The rules are simple and have been around a long time – have a "hook," which in our case is the logo and our tag line, "Flavor, by nature" – and over-communicate, which we do through our website," Strongin said.

"It helps to have a unique story to go with the cheese, but most of all,

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Straus Organic Creamery Joins Non-GMO Project To Help Protect Organic Crops

Marshall, CA—Straus Family Creamery recently announced its commitment to The Non-GMO Project, verifying that all of its products are not contaminated by previously undetected genetically modified organisms (GMO).

GMO crop contamination was ruled a violation of federal law in a case against the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), because it caused economic harm to both conventional and organic farmers.

California Assemblyman Jared Huffman has introduced legislation that would make companies developing genetically engineered crops liable for damages when they contaminate other fields.

Certified organic crops are at risk of contamination by genetically modified crops, said Albert Straus, president of Straus Family Creamery.

“We have rejected organic feeds for our animals because of GMO contamination,” Straus said.

“We need better controls over our feeds and ingredients, so we have established this relationship with The Non-GMO Project to ensure that all of our products are verified as non-GMO,” he continued.

The program will function as an additional quality-assurance program for customers, Straus said, adding that company products will bear the project’s verification and compliance seal on labels.

“People want to avoid GMOs and know that GMOs are excluded from organic foods,” Straus said. “We are making sure that our products meet this expectation fully.”

“The integrity of the organic movement cannot be damaged by the presence of GMOs,” he continued. •

Saxon Cheese

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the cheese is well-priced and delicious and that sells itself. The rest is gravy,” he continued.

Today’s specialty cheese market provides the greatest challenge for us – the challenge of maintaining quality and consistency, Heimerl mentioned.

“That runs all the way through the chain, right back to the dairy farm,” he said. “We can’t compete without having the highest quality.”

A cheese company needs to constantly monitor its quality, Strongin echoed.

“You can too easily delude yourself into thinking what you make is great,” he said. “It’s a progression – never a finished ride.”

“If we get to the point where we have a cheese that can be compared - even closely compared - to Mike Gingrich’s cheese, we’ll take that challenge.”

— Gerald Heimerl, Saxon Creamery

Travel is also important when introducing a new cheese to a cross-country market. Sales is a person-to-person business, Strongin said.

“It is my belief that the only way to sell a product is to ‘throw it in a saddlepack and ride into town,’ he said.

“Our challenge – and it is a good one – is ramping up fast enough to keep up with demand,” Strongin said. “For that reason, we are staging release by regions and are already looking at expanding.”

Our goal in five years is to have 100 percent of the milk supply devoted to cheese production, Heimerl said.



Gerald Heimerl, is making cheese at Saxon Creamery in Cleveland, Wisconsin

“That might be perceived as pretty lofty, but if we can eek a profit out of it, that’s really the challenge,” he said.

“If we get to the point where we have a cheese that can be compared – even closely compared – to Mike Gingrich’s cheese, we’ll take that challenge,” Heimerl said.

However, if production goes beyond the current milk supply, Heimerl said the second you start pulling someone else’s milk in, quality is compromised.

New Cheese By Year s End

We have a whole coterie of cheeses in development, but we need to ride the wave of popularity first to ensure we have supply and maintain our

quality, Strongin said.

But look for at least one new cheese to be introduced before the end-of-year holidays, he continued.

Jerry has always wanted to make a Cheddar, so we’ll come together to do something unique when the time is right, McNaughton said. There’s also a dream to do a very soft cheese.

“The cheese we have created thus far are all from raw milk, and the learning curve is steep,” McNaughton said.

“The transition from grass to winter feed and back to grass again in May is keeping us on our toes,” he said. “The first six months of production is proving to be quite a challenge – getting it right takes time.” r

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