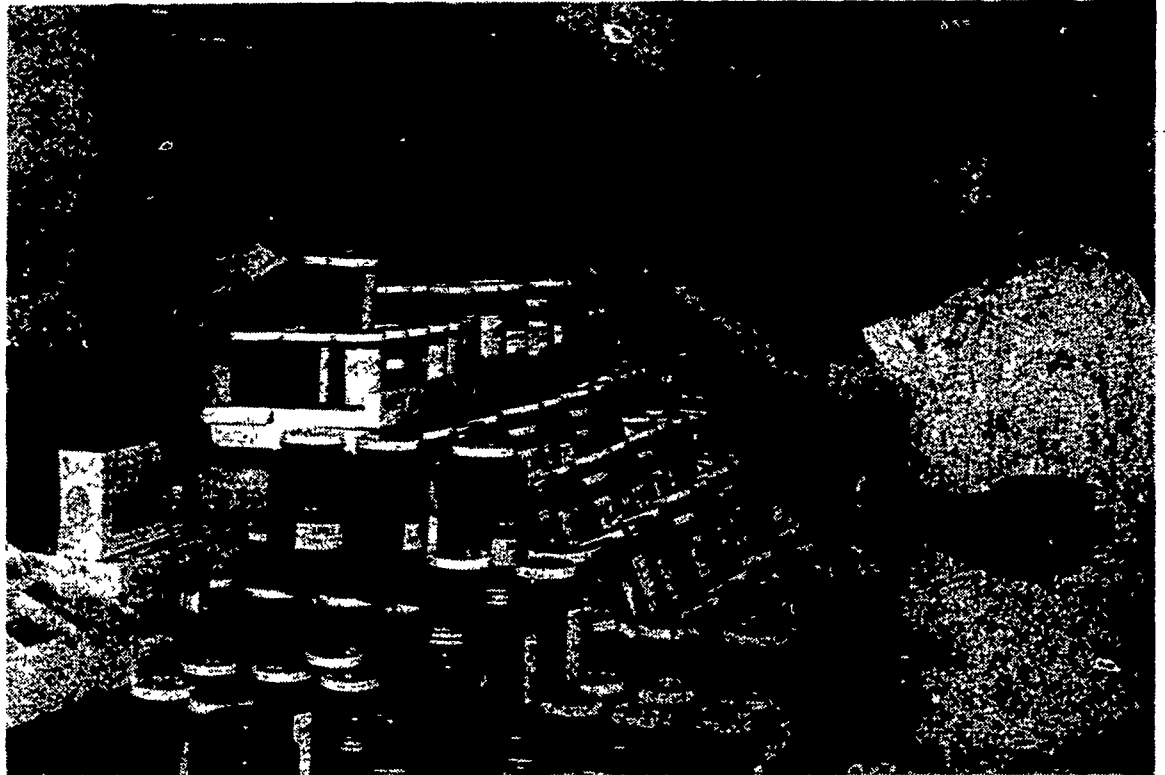




Shenk's cup cheese is a well-known local tradition, and many market regulars anticipate their visit to Shenk's stand to pick up cup cheese, ball cheese or schmierkase.



Grace Shenk offers a customer change after she has chosen a selection from the more than 40 varieties of jams, jellies and relishes.

Only Lancaster producer

## Shenk maintains local tradition with cup cheese

BY SALLY BAIR  
Staff Correspondent

With the focus on dairy products during the month of June, one's thoughts naturally turn to creamy ice cream, tangy yogurt, swiss cheese, cheddar cheese and a host of other well-known dairy foods.

Cup cheese may not be the first food to enter your thoughts, but it is a popular local product that has a long tradition, especially among people with Amish or Mennonite heritage.

Shenk's Cheese Company, New Danville, is the only local producer of cup cheese, a change from a few years ago when there was active competition in the market.

For the uninitiated, cup cheese is a cultured, semi-soft cheese, traditionally made in farm homes from the excess skim milk.

Elsie Graybill, who with her brother Robert Shenk own Shenk's, remembers that her father Clayton H. had a small milk route for which the family churned butter. From the excess skim milk they made cup cheese by heating a can of milk on top of the cook stove. Then the children would help rub the curd through a sieve to get it fine, and it would be placed in big bowls on the cook stove to ripen. They used a #10 skillet to heat the cheese, and would sell it at market for 10 cents a cup.

Eventually Clayton sold the milk route and went into cup cheese - making in a bigger way. It was into a partnership in 1947, with Clayton H. and children Paul, Robert S. and Elsie, sharing in the business.

Though the principal of cheese-making remains the same, the business has changed to meet the demands of increased business and government regulations. Modern, gleaming stainless steel equipment has replaced the skillet and the wood stove.

Today Shenks purchase skim milk directly from Greens Dairy and cut out the step of separating the milk. Bob Shenk explains that it takes about 100 pounds of skim milk to produce 6½ pounds of curd - the first step in the process.

The skim milk is heated in vats which hold 10,000 pounds of milk each, to a temperature of about 86 degrees. The culture is added and allowed to set 6 to 7 hours. The curds are broken up and heated to 110 degrees. The whey is then drained and the curd is dipped out and pressed.

After it is dry, the curd is pulverized to the size of rice grains, and stored in stainless steel pans for aging. The length of aging depends upon whether it will be marketed as mild, medium, or sharp cup cheese, with sharp being aged several weeks.

The pulverized curds are stored



Bob Shenk empties curds as one step in the process of making ball cheese. The curds will be hand rolled and covered with soda before the aging process which gives it its characteristic appearance and flavor.



This vat holds about 10,000 pounds of skim milk, heating it to the proper temperature to begin the process of making curds for cup cheese and ball cheese.

in a temperature-controlled room, where they naturally get warm as any organic matter will. The room is kept cool to prevent over-heating and developing off flavors.

The curds are then agitated to break them up. Salt is added and it is mixed and stirred three or more times. In several days it ripens to a yellowish mass. This is broken up and put in a steam jacketed cooker with water or skim milk.

After it is cooked, the cheese is strained into stainless steel buckets to be packed. The small containers are filled by machine and cooled to be packed for shipping. The cheese which will go to market is simply stored in stainless steel pans.

Elsie is enthusiastic about cup cheese and remarks, "It has a taste all its own. I don't know what to compare it with. It's supposed to be spread on crackers. People who haven't grown up with it are not as ready to accept it but my grandchildren eat it right out of the cup."

Bob says their best customers are those which are one generation off the farm. They still want cup cheese as they knew it as children. He expressed some consternation about the future, saying, "When older Germans die off, we lose a customer."

While cup cheese is the biggest volume of Shenk's business - they sell about 100,000 pounds per year - they produce several other products.

Schmierkase is another Shenk product and Elsie points out that it is different from cottage cheese, despite what people think. "It is a little more acid and is not heated quite as high as cottage cheese. It is whipped with sweet skim milk and has no cream, no sugar and no salt. It is good for people who are cardiac patients or who are on a special diet."

Ball cheese is yet another Shenk speciality. It is also known as Dutch cheese, or in German, "Handkase." It is a hand rolled product, with the curds being rolled in soda and then aged. The balls change consistency from the outside in, so when the balls are sliced, the inside is white like the curds, and the outside has turned yellow. Ball cheese is a high protein, low calorie food.

Egg cheese, or-Siegerkase, is another strictly local product offered by the Shenks. Egg cheese brings to mind the heart-shaped molds of yesteryear, but Shenks use a brick shaped mold and sliced it for packaging and retail sales.

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Lois Hershey, a part time employee of Shenk's, hand rolls the curds which will become ball cheese during an aging process.

# Homestead Notes