

Small Creameries: The Wave Of The Future?

KEESEVILLE, N.Y. — Some folks decry the decline of small "family farms." Some folks also try to do something about it. Sam and Denise Hendren are trying to do something about it.

Sam grew up on a small family dairy farm in Ohio. The family farm, owned and operated by Sam's cousins, milks about 1,100 cows and has 4,000 acres of crops. Sam has always wanted to farm and could have stayed and worked on that farm, but that's not the type of farming he wanted.

Like many farm kids, he was told that farming did not offer him a good future, and that he should go away, get an education, and go into business. He did that, but found himself driving around on lunch hour looking at cornfields.

Finally, Sam and Denise sold their business. Sam got the farm he wanted and Denise got the store she wanted, MoonTree Designs in Lake Placid. Sam says they have less money but a lot more fun.

He wanted a farm style that provides a pleasant lifestyle for a couple or family, that supports the local economy and re-energizes rural communities, and that could be attained by people without huge financial resources and the business acumen to manage those large investments well. The Farmstead Creamery at Clover Mead Farm, northeast of Keeseville, N.Y., is his attempt to develop and model such a farm. This is a rebirth of sorts for the farm. Milk was bottled and sold here when it was known as the Signor Farm during the first half of the last century.

Sam likes the idea of a small farmstead creamery because it

doesn't take a huge financial investment and is flexible. Sam knew there would be a learning curve, but the investment in the cows and cheese-making equipment was such that they could survive for a year without selling any product if need be. His start-up investment was less than \$5,000 for the milking system, \$9,000 for certified organic cows, and \$35,000 for the cheese room expansion and equipment. He bought good quality used equipment for the cheese plant and could have gotten started for less money.

The farmstead creamery concept is very flexible. Sam is milking cows and making cheese.

Instead, he could buy milk and not milk cows. He could raise heifers and beef animals instead of milking. If milk prices got high enough, he could add more cows and sell milk rather than make cheese. He could make other types of cheese, make yogurt, cottage cheese, or butter, or sell milk and cream. Vegetables can supplement the cheese sales. He could switch to goats or sheep for those special cheeses. The investment in the small milking setup and cheese equipment does not lock him into one particular production mode.

Sam started milking his small herd of Jersey cows (now six cows) and making cheddar cheese in June. His farm and the cheese produced there are "certified organic." The cows have lots of pasture, and are milked from April through December to take advantage of the pasture season and the nutritional values associated with milk from cows on fresh pasture.

Sam participates in the NYS-CHAP program to protect his herd's health and provide high



Clover Mead Farm's milking cows nibble their grain before going out to pasture for the day. The Farmstead Creamery is in the background. The farm and the cheese produced are certified organic.

quality milk as the foundation for his cheese. He focuses on "passive sanitation" to keep his facility exceptionally clean and prevent problems and to minimize the need for harsh sanitizers. For instance, he has boots that are used only in the cheese room, and other boots for the milking parlor, and other boots that are used in the barnyard and fields. By maintaining a very calm environment for the cows, he keeps the milking parlor area clean. The cows haven't manured in the parlor in at least two and a half months.

Sam makes cheese three days a week. When I got there for my tour, the milk was in the pasteurizer/cheese vat so we donned hair nets, lab coats, and cheese room boots, then stepped on a sanitizing mat as we entered. The cheese curd is made from pasteurized milk, but the cheddar, feta, and Appenzellar are raw milk cheeses. The pasteurizer/cheese vat is a double duty piece of equipment. It was in use as a cheese vat for making English-style cheddar cheese Tuesday when I was there.

To start the cheddar cheese, the milk in the cheese vat is heated to 86 degrees Fahrenheit (F). He inoculates the milk with a bacterial starter culture that looks like bread yeast granules and lets it set for an hour. Then he adds rennet that makes the milk turn the consistency of thick yogurt as the bacteria consume the lactose in the milk, now called "curd."

Cheese "harps," frames strung with what looked like monofila-

ment fishing line, are used to slice the curd into peanut sized cubes. This curd is then slowly heated to 100 degrees F and held there for half an hour while it is stirred constantly. Whey is expelled from the curds during this process and protein is concentrated in the curds. The whey is then drained off and the curds are stacked into clumps to further drain and compress, a process called "cheddaring."

The curds are then salted and put into press molds for about 36 hours. The wheels of cheese are taken out of the molds and allowed to dry for 24 hours. Then the wheels are coated with a clear wax sealant and put in the cooler to age. Sam is also making cheeses with different types of rinds, including cloth.

That's how the cheese is made, but dairy farmers may wonder what the profitability and economics looks like. Sam makes about 200 pounds of cheese in 2 and 15 pound wheels each week. Commercial scale (as opposed to artisanal or small farmstead) organic cheddar cheese is selling for \$8 per pound. Although his cheese certainly is "artisanal," Sam retails his cheddar cheese for \$8 per pound, and wholesales it for \$5 per pound so it will be affordable for the general public. This is about equivalent to a farmer getting \$60 per CWT for his milk, rather than the \$10 per CWT dairy farmers are getting.

Sam sells his fresh cheese curd, mild English-style cheddar, and feta and appewood smoked feta. His Appenzellar cheese needs to age longer before the first batch

will be available.

There is \$11 billion of cheese sold in the U.S. each year. Certainly there is room for some small cheesemakers, particularly to replace some of the cheese imported from overseas. There are at least 30 farmstead cheesemakers in Vermont. It's nice to think that Essex and Clinton counties of New York could be dotted with small farmstead cheese plants.

Sam is committed to trying to revitalize family farms and the communities that depended on them. He is active in the Adirondack Harvest efforts to link local farmers with consumers and help consumers identify local farm products to buy. He is also willing to help others interested in starting a small farmstead creamery. He would love to see a farmstead creamery, with its own distinctive products and characteristics, in every town in Clinton and Essex counties.

To find out where to purchase The Farmstead Creamery's cheese or to get information about starting your own farmstead creamery, call Sam Hendren at (518) 834-7306 or e-mail him at hendren@northnet.org. An organic food home delivery service near New York City is carrying their cheese. They have also joined the Campaign for Real Milk and will be listed on the Website at www.real-milk.com and are starting a local chapter.

For information on a variety of small farm topics, visit Cornell's Small Farms WebSite at www.smallfarms.cornell.edu.



Sam Hendren of the Farmstead Creamery at Clover Mead Farm stirs the cheese starter culture into milk in his cheese vat. Certified organic cheddar cheese and cheese curd are produced at this farm in the Town of Chesterfield in Essex County. Photos by Beth Spagh.

'Small Farm Boosters' Are On Rise In Extension

ONEONTA, N.Y. — For decades, the conventional wisdom handed down to farmers from government, lenders, agribusiness and many farm advisers was more or less along the lines of "get big or get out."

But the tremendous ingenuity, creativity, and sheer persistence of small-scale farmers has become apparent, especially in the last couple of decades, and we're beginning to realize that there are lots of ways farmers can "stay small and stay in."

And there are lots of ways beginning farmers can "go small

and get in." Small farms are here to stay.

Small farms have always been an important part of Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE's) audience. In many counties, virtually all farms are small. Sometimes small farms feel they're not getting the attention and support they deserve from extension.

But increasingly, CCE educators are seeing the state's smaller farms as a "growth area" for local agriculture and extension programming, as well as an exciting and rewarding audience to work with.

For example, 53 different extension projects have been funded in the last three years by the CCE Grants Program for Innovative Small Farms Education, for a total of \$131,610.

Recently a group of Cornell Cooperative Extension "Small Farms Boosters" met at Hartwick College in Oneonta, N.Y., to share ideas about how to strengthen their educational programming for smaller farms. Sponsored by Cornell's Small Farms Task Group, the meeting featured a presentation and discussion with Dr. John Ikerd, pro-

fessor emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri.

Ikerd has written extensively about small farms and sustainable agriculture, arguing that small farms, not large industrialized farms, are the future for agriculture in most rural communities. The paper he presented at the CCE retreat can be viewed at www.smallfarms.cornell.edu. Click on "About Small Farms" and then click on "Contributions of Small Farms."

"Our purpose was to gather a small group of highly dedicated extension educators — people

who are enthusiastic about small farms and have a lot of experience working with them," said Joanna Green, extension associate with Cornell's Small Farms Program. "The discussion was part of our ongoing effort to strengthen Cornell's support for small farms."

The Cornell Small Farms Task Group has developed a set of suggestions for extension program planning for small farms. To view the recommendations, go to www.smallfarms.cornell.edu. Click on "Working With Small Farms," then click on "Educational Programming."