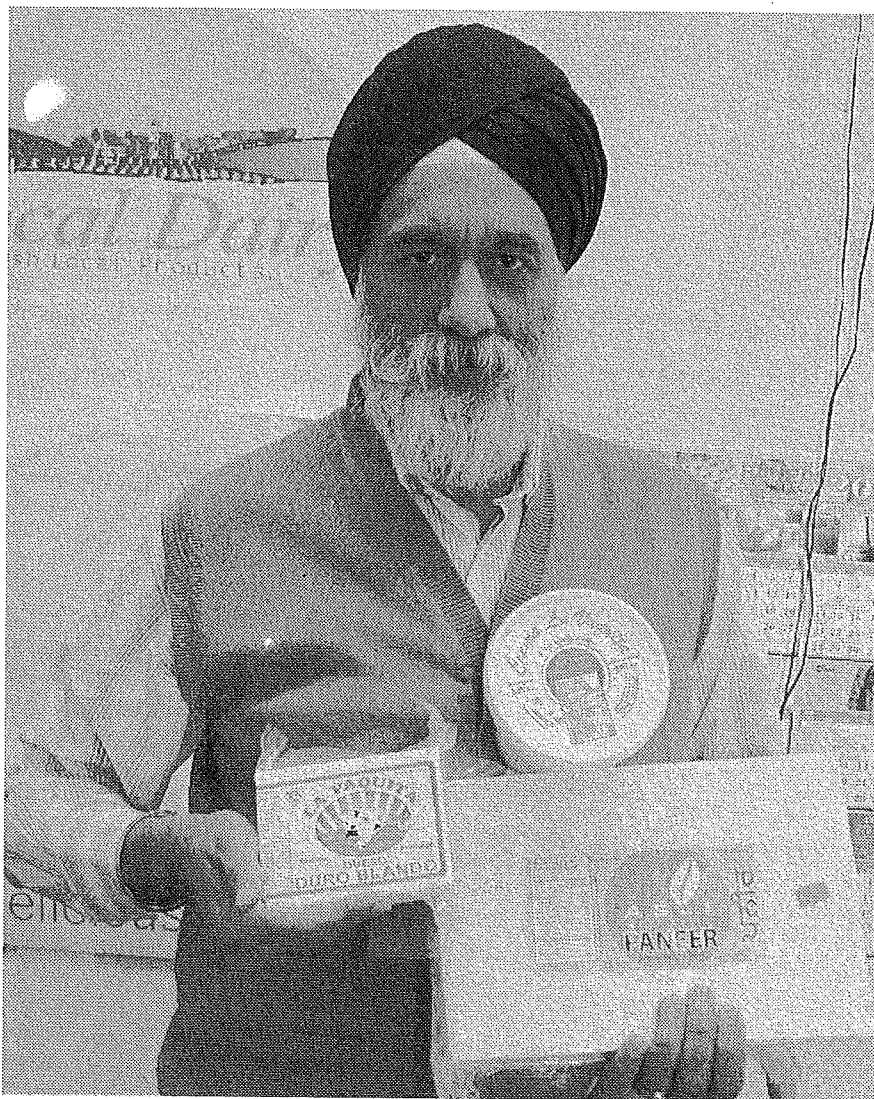


CHEESE COUNTRY AGAIN

Once famous for its cheese-making, Oxford County is re-establishing itself as a centre for niche cheese makers who are taking advantage of the local milk supply

Photos and story by Geoff Dale



Amarjit Singh shows some of the diversity of products produced by Local Dairy Products at Ingersoll. Cheese making started in the family with his mother.

Already widely recognized as The Dairy Capital of Canada, it appears Oxford County is poised to add an ethnic/niche cheese variable to that much-vaunted agricultural label.

Boasting one well-established ethnic cheese maker known throughout much of Ontario and

ready to welcome a young entrepreneur about to test the waters of niche market potentials, Oxford may be on the verge of expanding its agricultural and agribusiness horizons.

As owner/general manager of the family-run Local Dairy Products in Ingersoll, Amarjit Singh sifts through

a mountain of paperwork in his cluttered office as he points to a seemingly never-ending list of products the company offers. The range of cheese is startling, including Indian, Dutch, Belgium, Mennonite, Polish, Mexican varieties and more.

The Latin American-styled queso fresco, the heavy set cultured crème fraîche, koch kase, baby gouda, baby limburger, edam, havarti, hallaoumi, shudh ghee made from freshly churned sweet butter and the El Salvadorian queso duro blando – even the most educated cheese aficionado might wonder – do the selections end?

In the past he processed milk from sheep and goats but now only uses cows' milk, noting there was a consequent improvement in the quality following change. And it is that desire for the highest quality and ultimate approval from the customers he strives for on a day-to-day basis.

"My mother was the first cheesemaker in the family," says Singh. "She made cheese because you couldn't get good quality paneer (a semi-soft unripened cheese used in Indian cooking). At first we started to make the paneer at home. There was nothing like it available on the market.

"Much of what was out there were bastardized versions of the real product. We make 100 per cent authentic Indian-style paneer using two simple natural ingredients – locally sourced milk and vinegar."

Employing the benefits of hands-on family experiences related to cheesemaking, he pursued his goals by poring over volumes of books on the subject and just "being inquisitive". Although primarily self-taught, he took microbiology and cheese courses at the University of Guelph, saying he would never close any doors to opportunities that could

advance the business.

Never one for standing still, Singh made sure he got the right information from the right people. With the Indian-style paneer, there were those direct family connections and the traditions lovingly passed down from his mother. When it came to newer products like the Mexican cheeses, he called Mexico and even travelled to a number of states like Pennsylvania and New York to see the process up close.

Initially he received milk through the Canadian Dairy Commission's Domestic Dairy Products Innovation Program. When that was concluded, he was granted the volume of plant supply quota he was using, thereby assuring his supply.

Singh operated his first plant on Trillium Drive in Kitchener under a federal license for nine years. In 1999 he moved his growing business to Ingersoll, opening in the 48,000 square foot former Ingersoll Cheese Factory. The federal license was dropped in favour of a provincial permit, as he was not exporting goods outside Ontario's boundaries.

"I wanted fresh milk for all products so that is why I chose Ingersoll," he says. "Local is key to the business. It will always be local. We are after freshness and the highest quality so we will always use local milk. Local Dairy Products was also the first in Canada to offer a probiotic yogurt and not at a premium price."

With about six to eight regular employees, including his wife Gurinder and son Sajeev, he utilizes about 10,000-15,000 square feet of the historic local structure. The business is fully equipped with all the tools of the trade – from vats and draining tables to cheese press and a covered receiving bay added about six years ago.

Monday to Wednesday is reserved for cheesemaking, with packing on Wednesday and Friday and delivery Thursday to Sunday. The ever-expanding customer list from mom-and-pop groceries to major chains from Oxford County to Toronto, Ottawa and Windsor is as impressive as the product diversity: Sobey's, Food Basics, Springbank Cheese, Foodland, Highland Farms, Milagro – Toronto's high-end Mexican



Cheesemaking takes place Monday to Wednesday.

cantina in the heart of the entertainment district, Smith Cheese Inc. in London and more.

"This is a very good market that is growing in large part because of those new to the area, for example Asian people," says Singh, who recently moved to Ingersoll to be close to the business. "Just the other day someone knocked on the door then walked in and asked me what kind of cheese we made."

"Apparently his brother-in-law enjoys cooking and travels to India every year. He said, 'He just loves the cheese there so I wanted to surprise him with the authentic product.' So we made a sale right there. You can sell hundreds or thousands of dollars of product but you have to remember these people are our customers."

Dairy Farmers of Ontario director John Palmer says he recognizes the consumers' desire to buy local so the board always makes the effort to accommodate processors of this size, whether it is a question of a product from a certain area within the province or a specific breed.

"Of course the goal is always to increase the market so we applaud Mr. Singh for his efforts," said Palmer, who represents Oxford and Waterloo. "With the influx of more immigrants, we are steadily becoming a more multi-cultured society all the time."

"Many of these people like to have a product they are accustomed to and, of course, Canadians are also enjoying the prospect of trying out ethnic products. Paneer, for example, is very popular in places like Toronto. Mr. Singh is doing a very good job of meeting this growing need."

Just outside of Woodstock 28-year-old Shep Ysselstein surveys the partially constructed building that will soon be known as Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese. The opening may be a few months down the road, likely in late summer, but he's more than ready for the challenge of offering different varieties of Swiss cheese.

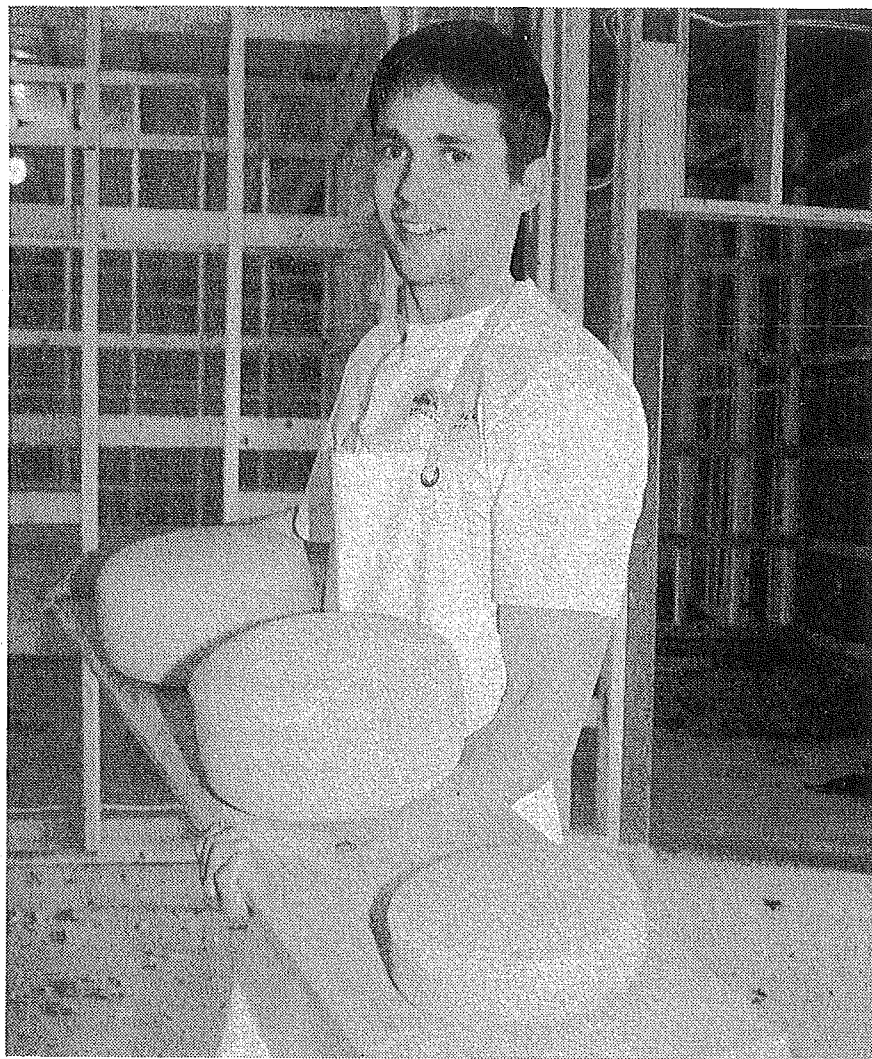
Eying some sort of an agribusiness project since he graduated with a business degree from Dordt College in Sioux Centre, Iowa in 2004, he sounds eager and geared up to open wide the doors. Not coincidentally his parents' (John and Helen) dairy farm, where he grew up and worked alongside his four brothers, is right next-door.

After graduation he travelled to Thunder Bay on one American Thanksgiving, arriving at the Thunder Oak Cheese Farm where the Schep family has been making Gouda cheese since 1995 from their own Holstein cows.

"That's where my idea became a little more specific," said Ysselstein. "The more I thought about it, from a business point of view, the more I realized there was a growing market for ethnic cheese and foods, for locally produced foods in general."

"I saw the growing public concern over where their food products were coming from. These were all good indicators that a small cheese factory at home would work. Besides, I really like the idea of having my own business and I love all aspects of farming. Once I started making the cheese I really enjoyed that experience."

He then took a couple of classes at the University of Guelph and University of Vermont that included some actual practice. He then joined forces with a woman who needed help with a dairy operation in upstate New York. With no hands-on experience to his credit but a burning desire to learn, he worked there without pay for one winter.



Though only 28 years old, Shep Ysselstein has already had a wide experience in cheese making from Vermont, to Switzerland to Vancouver Island. Now he's building a new plant outside Woodstock to open this summer.

"Her parents had a very small dairy farm," he says. "I did everything there was to do. They had a cheese vat that is similar to the one I now own, 1200 litres. This was a really lucky break for me because I got involved in the whole process."

Although he was fast becoming well acquainted with the cheesemaking process, he was not yet ready to embrace the concept of tapping solely into the niche market.

A year later, embarking on his next venture with his own funds and obtaining a work visa under a training program, he found himself employed in Switzerland in a village named Guttannen in the canton of Bern. It was here where he became a part of a centuries-old custom carried out annually by local agricultural communities in countless Swiss

towns.

Every summer several farmers place a few cows into a special group. The animals start their trek up the mountains, along the way busily eating from the mountain pastures. When they return, the resulting milk is made into cheese.

"I was there with another cheesemaker," he said. "Everyday we would milk the cows and make the cheese. It was one kind of a mountain cheese that is trademarked under Bern. I was there for four months in the summer from June to the end of September.

"At this point I was thinking about the possibility of processing Swiss cheese. I wasn't really focusing on a specific ethnic market but rather, just making Swiss style cheeses. There are about 100 varieties and every area has its own type. I decided not to

produce the traditional cheese Emmentaler – the one with the holes."

What Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese will offer will be versions of the Bern™ mountain cheese, another similar to Appenzeller™ and one just like Mutshli™.

From Switzerland he moved on to Vancouver Island where he made Brie cheese and Gouda style cheese for eight months from September 2008 to May 2009. He returned home in May 2009 where he began seriously contemplating a move next with his parents and setting up his cheese factory.

From May to December of 2010 he formulated his business plan, working with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. He acquired funding through two loans of \$250,000 each. The first – the federal Sand Plains Community Development Fund – assists rural communities in the Sand Plains region – the five counties of Brant, Elgin, Middlesex, Norfolk and Oxford – to build a stronger, more diversified economy outside of tobacco.

Ysselstein also secured a \$250,000 Community Futures loan administered by Oxford with Ag Canada supplying the money. Construction of the 6,000 square foot structure began last December 1, with the necessary equipment like the vat, draining table, cheese press and brining equipment in place. The Business Development Bank of Canada is onboard on the consulting side, looking at a more focused plan and a strategy on how to get his name out there.

With milk from his parents' farm, he plans to start work by June 1, employ a couple of staffers at first, wait several weeks for the cheese to mature properly and then invite the general public for an grand opening in August.

"This won't be just the cheese factory," he says. "There will a store, cows, crop plots and a full educational experience, tours for the public, windows lining the cheese factory so people can learn about the process.

"I hope to target that group of people interested in making a statement about what they buy. More

people are into home entertaining with wine and cheese parties and in Oxford County a large segment of the population is from Europe, particularly the Dutch. They love cheese on their sandwiches and we will be treating them to brands that are not commonplace."

He plans to sell directly to consumers through the store and in farmers' markets, sell to local stores in Oxford County and distribute to larger outlets in places like Toronto and London.

In keeping with its plan of developing more culinary agricultural tourism in the area, Tourism Oxford has assisted him in an attempt to ultimately make his cheese factory a tourist destination.

"Our cheesemakers are big attractors in the tourism industry," says Cathy Bingham of Tourism Oxford. "I'm just over the moon, especially since he is incorporating interpretative tourist tours. He's done his research, training and dealt effectively with the red tape that comes attached to a new business."

Bingham also spoke about the project recently with Anita Stewart, Canadian food activist and author of 11 books including *Canada - The Food, The Recipes, The Stories*. Stewart predicted this could just be the beginning, suggesting it was something like "back to the future" because during the 1800s Oxford County was home to 98 cheese factories.

For both Singh and Ysseltein, in addition to the pure aspects of cheesemaking and being involved with an exciting and sometimes challenging enterprise, it is a business that features an even deeper, more personal side.

Singh, who still works tirelessly 12-14 hours a day, says, "The bottom line is that it is within my heart, in my heart. I love doing this. It is my family and happily Sajeev is the third generation carrying on this proud tradition."

Growing up on the family farm Ysseltein got to understand the diversity of agriculture - whether it was manual labour or the business end. "Now I will be communicating face-to-face with people and that personal aspect adds yet another dimension to this venture."◊