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Making artisan cheese in rural Oxford County

Shep Ysselstein knew he didn't want to milk cows, but making cheese is something he's inspired to do

BY JUNE FLATH

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Curries - To the casual observer Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese factory looks like a construction zone. But to owner and operator Shep Ysselstein that would be calling the glass half empty. To him, "the walls are up, the roof has been built and the milk will soon be curdling!"

By mid-summer, this young entrepreneur and artisan cheese maker will be well into production creating three unique handmade cheeses.

The traditionally crafted Swiss style cheeses will be made with milk produced at the family dairy farm, Friesvale Farms. Established by Shep's grandfather after he immigrated to the area in the 1950s from Holland, the 120-head farm is now operated by Shep's father and brother.

"I love the farm," he says, "but I did not want to milk cows. The idea of making cheese intrigued me, but I knew nothing about making cheese or the industry."

He set out to change that. He already had a university degree in business so he began to supplement his entrepreneurial knowledge with practical skill.

He took cheese-making courses at University of Guelph, and University of Vermont. He worked at a small cheese factory in Upper New York State for three months, then he spent a summer learning the traditional Swiss cheese-making techniques from the masters, the Swiss.

The cattle grazed on the mountains and the cheese craftsmen milked the cows by hand morning and night, stoked the wood fire under the copper cauldron to heat the milk, and turned the milk hand, making cheese just as they did 500 years ago.

He says it was a lot of work, but the process was "beautiful." While each experience offered infinite learning opportunities, "it was during the time when I was making cheese in the Swiss Alps that I truly fell in love with the art and mastered the technique." He added some Canadian flavour to his experiences working at Vancouver Island Natural Pastures Cheese factory for nine months before coming home to Oxford.



Shep Ysselstein of Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese factory looking forward to launching his products this summer

The vision, however, is not only about making and selling cheese, it's about educating the consumers. Large glass windows will allow visitors the opportunity to watch the artisan at work. He likes the idea of offering a barnyard of approachable animals: calves, sheep, chickens as well as garden plots of soybean, corn and hay so visitors can see what it is the cows eat.

He can also imagine walking trails across the rolling fields that stretch out behind the cheese factory and for those who aren't interested in hiking across the landscape, benches encouraging people to sit back and enjoy the view. He would like to see day packages at Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese partnered with area bed and breakfast hosts.

"It's time to step back and buy things made locally, meet the farmer who makes the food."

He has settled on three different cheeses: a mountain recipe that creates a hard cheese, appenzeller which is similar to gouda, and mutchli, a soft cheese, similar to brie. Once he is up and running and at full production he expects his 6,000 square foot operation to employ six to 10 people including packaging and retail people.

Ysselstein received funding support in the form of a loan from Sand Plains Community Development Fund for the physical structure and timing has been in his favour for a number of industry supports. His interest in developing unique cheeses followed in the Dairy



Cheese artisan Shep Ysselstein and his official welcoming committee, Bo, the dog

Farmers of Ontario 2006 launch of their artisan cheese program encouraging new small-scale cheese makers using traditional methods.

They dedicated three million litres to the annual volume of milk used for Ontario cheese production. In order to be eligible for the quota he had to create and be able to produce a unique product that was currently not under production in Canada.

Each artisan cheese maker received quota for up to 300,000 litres. There is also the Canadian Cheese Society launched in January of 2011 to support

and promote the development of artisan/farmstead/specialty cheeses. The development of Ysselstein's Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese factory also meshes nicely with Oxford County's developing agri-tourism. Says Ysselstein, "Oxford is the dairy capital, the cheese factory fits well with the image they are promoting."

Watch for grand opening festivities at Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese summer of 2011. For further information visit www.gunnshillcheese.ca. Or contact: Shep Ysselstein, 519-532-9189 or shep@gunnshillcheese.ca.