

# CreamLine

a big voice for little dairies

Issue No. 1  
Spring 1999



## Making Profitability Part of the Plan

“We came from a generation who thought it was a sin to make money. We had to get past this mental block before we eventually learned that in order to do the things we wanted to do we had to be able to make a living, and that means making enough profit to pay the bills.” So began cheesemaker Alyce Birchenough during the Southern SAWG (Sustainable Agriculture Working Group) conference session by the same name as the title of this article.

Alyce and her husband Doug Wolbert operate “Sweet Home Farm” in – where else? – southern Alabama, on the “Redneck Riviera,” near Gulf Shores. Although Alyce’s cheesemaking began as a hobby after Alyce received her dreamed-for cow as a wedding present, over the years the couple has developed a strong, stable business selling farmstead cheeses from their on-farm store, made from milk produced by a herd of only 10-12 Guernsey cows. They began farming in Michigan, but got tired of shoveling frozen manure, so picked up the whole operation and moved to the balmier climate of Elberta, Alabama. While the two were selling milk to a co-op, they calculated their milk production cost at \$11.68/cwt. At \$17/cwt from the co-op, they weren’t making a lot of money. Adding value by making cheese offered them an opportunity to gross between \$40 and \$70/cwt, a noticeable improvement.

The couple built their processing business over time, having to take off-farm jobs in the beginning to save enough money to capitalize the business. Alyce advises anyone interested in value-added processing to milk to start small, and start with the inspectors. At Sweet Home they must pass inspection on three different levels – county, state and federal. The inspectors signed off on their plans before they began building; this helped them to avoid problems later. For a cheese vat, Alyce and Doug converted a 200-gallon ice bank cooling tank, in which they can make cheese from three days’ production of milk. The conversion consisted of removing instrumentation and the copper coils for cooling, and welding shut any openings that resulted. Then hot water pipes were installed in the jacket to allow for heating the milk. This was a cost-effective way to obtain a cheese vat, but appropriate sized equipment was not easy to come by. Alyce suggests looking for equipment in the Midwest, while noting that it took eight years to find her 30-gallon pasteurizer. They made their own cheese presses using Corian (the countertop material) arms. Bleach bottles filled with water are hung from the arms to apply weight to the presses, an inexpensive and flexible system. Alyce says plastic food grade buckets with holes

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Do you know the singular, gender-neutral term for “Cattle”? See p. 5.

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Well, okay, it's not a "big voice" – yet. *CreamLine* is conceived as a networking and information tool, with topics that cover the whole range of small dairy concerns: from getting started with a family cow, goat or sheep, to how forages affect milk quality, to selling value-added products in the fancy foods market.

Before embarking on this publication, I asked lots of people for advice and opinions. In these days of web surfing, e-mail discussion groups and instantaneous information, is there still a need for a good old-fashioned, snail-mail newsletter? Though there were a few dedicated web-heads who questioned the sense of a paper newsletter, the overwhelming answer was "go for it." There are many of us who are relatively proficient on the Internet but who still prefer sitting down with a real newsletter and filing it away for future reference, without concern that the computer will someday say "unable to open file CreamLine1" or "sorry, your disk is ditzzy." The pile of newsletters waiting to be read on the kitchen table is testimony to my preference. And believe it or not, there are even a few folks out there who don't have a computer! But the final impetus for this publication came from Duncan Hilchey of Cornell University. He's been working with small dairies on a value-added project there, which he spoke about at the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group conference in January. Afterwards I approached him with some questions, and he showed vague interest in the project I am working on (described below), until I mentioned that I was planning to produce a small dairy newsletter. With that, he lit up, shook my hand and gave me the last bit of encouragement I needed to get going on this. Thanks, Duncan.

Right now my interest in small dairies stems from a project I'm working on, The Hometown Creamery Revival (HCR), funded by Southern SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education). The HCR consists of a small group of dairy farmers, myself and consultants from various organizations, who are working to get the farms established in their own on-farm processing businesses. Two are already in operation, we expect at least one more to begin processing this year. My job as coordinator has put me in touch with many, many people who have the same ideas, the same concerns and the same frustrations. Over the next year we expect to have the following materials available from the Hometown Creamery Revival project:

- ◆ an annotated bibliography of small-dairy related publications and materials (summer)
- ◆ a booklet describing and illustrating examples of farmstead dairy processing facilities (fall)
- ◆ a how-to manual for getting started in dairy processing (winter 1999-2000)

Because we recognize the intense need for small-scale equipment, we have recently undertaken investigation of resources for new and used equipment, and may even begin working with fabricators to make some! I've been told that most of the small milk storage and processing equipment in this country has been exported to Latin America.

The HCR project is projected to last until the end of 1999 or mid-2000, but my personal interest in reviving small-scale dairies is ongoing. As a consumer of dairy products I want choices beyond the bland, mass-produced stuff available now. I want to be able to give my daughter dairy products without fear that her body is being deluged with antibiotics and unnatural hormones. As a long-time proponent of sustainable agriculture, I want to see dairy farming once again become a humane, environmentally sound practice that is economically viable for the farmer who wants to produce a clean, quality product without indulging in technological "miracles."

Currently my husband and I don't have a milk animal, but that may change soon – we raised a few calves last summer and Charley's nostalgia for milking grew intense. So right now we're looking for a milking Devon, an endangered breed that Charley has been interested in since his Mother Earth News days.

Please feel free to write with your questions and experiences. Let's connect! -- Vicki Dunaway

drilled in them work fine as molds. For storing cheeses, they built an aging room which will hold 400 eight-pound wheels of cheese.

Alyce began making cheese 20 years ago, and has been producing commercially for 15 years. They found universities to be particularly free with information on processing, and Alyce attended a cheese school at the University of Guelph to enhance her skills. Experimental-size equipment is used at Guelph, which is somewhat smaller than typical commercial size. Alyce found this course helpful in making the transition from home production to commercial production. "In the beginning," she says, "I wanted to make every type of cheese there is," but she soon found it more practical to limit herself to a few varieties that are especially popular with her customers. Still, these varieties cover ten of the twelve basic families of cheese, and offer the customer lots of choices. She says it is important to "bend over backwards" to please customers; she will even make custom batches of cheese in small quantities on occasion. Being sensitive to consumer demand has enabled Alyce to develop a line that is well accepted. "Sample freely," she says, to sell a new product.

Milking is not a seasonal operation at Sweet Home Farm. It is a "relentless job," Alyce says, but provides a consistent income. She and Doug have had to accept that they must take separate vacations, but "when you work together all the time, that may not be such a bad thing." Alyce does most of the cheesemaking, Doug most of the farm work. They share the milking and other daily chores. The weekly cheese production schedule is based on volume of milk and perishability. Generally, cheese manufacturing occupies two or three intensive days each week; on other days there is light work such as inspecting and turning cheeses, and other maintenance chores. The farm store is open four days a week, closed Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. When asked whether visitors try to come to the store on other days, Alyce said they were pretty casual about opening up in the beginning, but learned that they would have no privacy at all if they didn't set limits. At first they tried a sign announcing store hours at the farm entrance, but visitors just ignored it. "For some reason, they respect a gate," she notes.

"Your time is valuable," Alyce says, and advises producers not to sell themselves short. If people want to take tours of your farm, she recommends charging for that service (Sweet Home does not give tours). Once you are experienced, you can also sell your knowledge by giving seminars and workshops. Alyce does not give tours of her processing area, mainly because of the possibility of contamination. However, there is a variety of farm animals that people can observe, and a picnic area where customers can enjoy their farm experience, which is part of what Sweet Home is selling. People from all walks of life come to the farm, in everything from "Jaguars to jalopies." They "enjoy getting a little dust on the car" as they drive up the long drive to the store. When hosting visitors, it is important to be aware of potential hazards, such as animals that may bite children, bees

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# A Quick Tour of Goat Dairying in France

by William A. Lake

We spent about three weeks in France during the month of June (1998). Though the basis of the trip was to attend the games of the World Cup, I had an opportunity to schedule a couple of visits to goat farms and small cheese making facilities in the French countryside. I also had the opportunity to meet other organizations in France involved in providing assistance to small-scale goat farmers. Finally, I was given a tour of one of the biggest goat cheese making facilities in the region; they specialize in manufacturing cheese with pasteurized milk for export to the USA and those countries which require pasteurized milk products.

Overall the experience was quite instructive. There are many things which can be learned from the French caprine industry, especially for small scale farmers, since many of the problems we have here are also present over there. I brought some new ideas that I will attempt to implement at the farm in the near future. I also left good contacts for further research and other assistance I might need further on.

First of all I had the opportunity to spend a couple of days in the Poitou-Charentes region of France, The city of Poitiers is the largest one in the region. This region produces about 50% of the goat milk products elaborated in France. They work mainly with Alpine and Saanen breeds of dairy goats. In Poitiers I met with the people of the World Goat Center, which has a fairly comprehensive site on the Internet. ([www.world-goat-centre.com](http://www.world-goat-centre.com), then click on "English home" unless of course you read French). In reality they are big in the Internet but their offices are small, as they are just getting started. They work out of the Regional Extension Service office. Dr. Pellerin, who is in charge of the Center, was quite helpful in arranging meetings with local producers and others.

This Center is quite interesting, as most information on goat rearing, husbandry, milk processing and others within France is catalogued there. They are an excellent stepping-stone to get one started in the right way within the French caprine industry. These people put me in contact with the Alliance Pastorale (AP), in Montmorillon, about

30 minutes from Poitiers. The AP is a cooperative association which works with farmers throughout France. They also work with people in many countries. The AP specializes in sheep, goat and ovine rearing. They provide technical assistance and other services to French farmers; they have veterinarians on-board and can assist in management problems. They also help in obtaining equipment and supplies. They have people specialized in cheese making and can be of assistance to their members at various stages of production. They also have a presence on the Internet at [www.alliancepastorale.fr/](http://www.alliancepastorale.fr/) It is the AP who are looking to start an operation such as they have in France here in the USA. They would like to meet and know about other goat rearing groups and

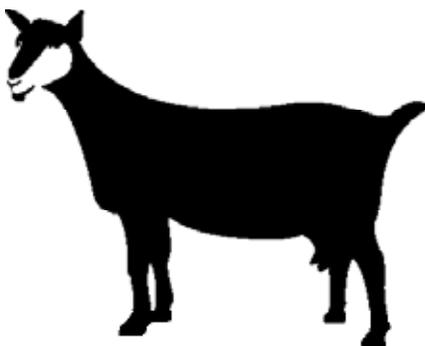
others whom to contact, in order to determine if there is something they can assist in. Most of their contacts in the USA have been with isolated farmers, such as myself, but not much has developed. I thought maybe your Creamery project might be something they would like to know about.

Back to the visits. My first visit was to a fairly small farm run by a couple who were rearing only nine milking

does. These were producing about 3-4 gallons of milk per milking. The milk was being processed in a temporary milk processing facility at the farm; there farm-made cheese was being manufactured. The man was in charge of the animal rearing and husbandry. The wife manufactured the cheese and marketed it. The cheese was being sold to local restaurants and to others in the region through the local open markets, which are held regularly throughout the area.

After milking the milk was brought in to the cheese processing facility, it was strained and cooled for a couple of hours. After that it was mixed with rennet. After some time it coagulated, it was put in molds, and after a period of some 36-48 hours the cheeses were put out to age. Some were salted, others received a covering with ashes, others basil or garlic. All in all the process was simple and direct.

There was very little special equipment: a couple of



drying racks, a large restaurant-type refrigerator and a draining table, some rennet and lots of molds. The results were small round cheeses weighing about a quarter pound. These were left to age for a few days. This made the crust a bit harder but not much. The retail price of a cheese of this type was about \$2.25/\$2.50 each. The facility was temporary, as these people were just getting into the business. The authorities had allowed them to set up the facility in that room in their house, which was specially set-aside just for cheese making. But they had 12 months to set up a completely separate facility that met all local requirements. [How civil! -- ed.] As with most cheeses in France, this is manufactured with raw milk, and there is no prospect in the near future to demand pasteurized milk for the preparation of cheeses.

After visiting the small farm, the people from the Alliance Pastorale took us to a training school in the town of Montmorillon. There at the training school, where local high school students receive training in animal husbandry and others, we visited their dairy goat rearing facility. They keep about 200 dairy goats, which are held as working unit; their production is marketed just as if it were another farm production. They have a small milking parlor for about 20 goats, all mechanized and everything. The milk produced is put into cooling tanks and the local cooperative picks it up regularly. The facility is an all-enclosed rearing facility, the operation was simple and efficient. Unfortunately at the time we visited there we were unable to speak with the manager of the operation. Yet as a training and demonstration facility it is available and open to all; they even have some people training from overseas.

The last facility we visited was a pasteurized goat cheese manufacturing facility, which is owned by the couturier firm. They are the prime exporters of goat cheese to the USA. This facility processes over 12 million liters of goat milk per year, of which over 75% is obtained within a five to ten mile radius of the facility. The raw milk is brought in to the facility and immediately pasteurized (this is unusual in France as there consumers prefer cheeses made with unpasteurized milk). The facility produces local

varieties of cheese for the domestic market. The bulk of the production is for export to other European countries and to the USA, where apparently demand is booming. This visit lasted well over four hours, going through the complete facility. They showed us new products they are planning to introduce in Europe, such as a soft spreadable cheese (cream cheese), which had been very well received in their market.

Concerning your questions as to what management methods could be applied in the USA:

- ◆ The minimization of hand labor; they suffer from a much greater problem of limited laborers than we do.
- ◆ The adequate scaling of their equipment. There is automated equipment for all scales of production.
- ◆ The simplicity of the operations, without the focus on the exhibition of the animals.
- ◆ Management of the herds in a fashion geared to the largest production with minimal inputs and costs.
- ◆ Extreme cost-consciousness and usage of all resources to the maximum.

*Many thanks to Mr. William Lake for writing up this account of his trip to France with his father last summer. They have a herd of about 50 Nubian goats in Culpeper County, VA, and are investigating the possibility of building a processing facility for goat cheese.*



**Answer:** Singular for “cattle” is “neat.” Ever heard of “neat’s foot oil”? This enlightening tidbit came from The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy News, in an article by Ian Mason, “A Linguistic Diversion on the Word ‘Cattle,’” July-August 1998.

Sweet Home -- Continued from page 3

and other farm inhabitants that visitors from the city may not be accustomed to, and to have appropriate liability insurance. Alyce also obtained product liability insurance as a rider on their regular farm insurance. Although expensive, liability insurance is a cost of doing business and offers some protection in a very litigious society.

In addition to the dairy cows, Alyce and Doug raise about 20 beef animals, vegetables and organically grown hay, though they are not certified. Neither is the cheese certified organic, mainly because they are unable to obtain organic feed easily. They prefer to emphasize the local and fresh qualities of their products, distinguishing themselves in the marketplace by making waxed raw milk cheese from Guernseys and selling flavor and wholesomeness. But since Sweet Home is the only farmstead cheese operation for cow's milk cheese in Alabama, distinction is not really a big problem at this point! Diversification in cheese varieties is important here – if they made all the same type, they would have had to go wholesale, but with a full line, they have never needed to go that route. Even chefs come and pay retail prices at the farm store. [In The Cheese Primer, chef Steven Jenkins says of Alyce and Doug, "I have a particular fondness for their efforts because they live just up the road from my mom and dad, who live nearby in Gulf Shores."]

Sweet Home Farm has a near-ideal location for a direct marketing operation, situated on Route 98 between Pensacola and Mobile. Between the city folks who are willing to drive a little to buy cheese regularly and the "snowbirds" who enjoy the farm as a tourist attraction, Alyce has no trouble finding takers for her 16 varieties of cheese year-round. Production is about 10,000-12,000 pounds of cheese per year, with sales prices from \$3.75 to \$10 a pound. Alyce does not apologize for the high prices of some products; she says that if price is what matters to a customer, that person can go to Winn-Dixie. Christmas is the best time for sales, when two-pound waxed gift cheese rounds and gift boxes are very popular. Wedges of aged cheeses and soft fresh cheeses are also big sellers in the store.

Alyce has found it profitable to stock the store with "go-with" items that customers can pick up when they visit. Wines, crackers, and fresh produce help fill up the shop and make it attractive. She says it is important to make a display appear "fresh and abundant." Alyce also emphasizes the importance of keeping good records and advises

that you "never stop researching your product." Very little marketing and advertising are necessary to promote Sweet Home's cheese. The couple printed up a double-fold brochure, which is distributed at Alabama Welcome Centers. Press releases to newspapers offer abundant free advertising; word-of-mouth and repeat customers are extremely important. Local restaurants feature Sweet Home cheeses on their menus. As mentioned, the farm was listed in The Cheese Primer, where Steven Jenkins rated their products as "first class."

Sweet Home Farm has found a way to spin their milk into gold. The owners have made a conscious decision to keep their business small and be content with their current production because it provides them with a good living and allows them to stay home on the farm. By providing unique, high-quality products they have built a loyal base of customers and stability in their income, a far cry from the roller-coaster cycles that most dairies are experiencing in the 1990s.

In a world with lots of Sweet Home Farms, the term "market share" might really have something to do with sharing.



## **Dairy Project News**

It seems like projects involving small-scale dairying are popping up all over the place! In each issue this column will feature and publicize a dairy project or cooperative. Some are offering educational opportunities that will be of interest to many folks.

One project that is quite complementary to the Hometown Creamery Revival is the Value-Added Dairy Opportunities Project, under the auspices of the Regional Farm & Food Project of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition in Albany, New York. This dairy project is also funded by SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education). Project Coordinator Tracy Frisch has spent the first year of the project gathering information on small-scale dairying in the Northeast (Paradise for such information), and is currently in the process of writing up and disseminating her notes from the many conferences and interviews she has attended in the process. These contain excellent information about the realities of on-farm processing and other value-adding opportunities, as related by farmers actually pursuing these options. The final products of the project will include "a farmer-friendly guide to establishing several types of innovative milk marketing enterprises" and "a case study report and financial analysis of various successful farmer-centered value-added dairy enterprises."

Tracy has also organized a Value-Added Dairy Workshop in Albany and a Farmstead Cheesemaking and Marketing Workshop, as well as farm tours of existing dairy processing facilities and holistic management training.

If you are interested in getting on the mailing list of this project, contact the Regional Farm & Food Project of CEC, 33 Central Avenue, Albany, NY 12210. For further information call Tracy Frisch at (518) 426-9331.

## **Mothers and Others Publish List**

Mothers and Others and Rural Vermont have jointly published the "Mothers' Milk List" on the World Wide Web. This is a list of certified organic and rBGH-free dairy products and dairies in the U.S. They are interested in updating the list, and encourage qualifying dairies to contact them. Organic dairies should send proof of organic certification to: Mothers & Others, 40 W. 20th St, New York, NY 10011. (Phone number: 888-326-4636.) Dairies who can guarantee that milk does not come from animals treated with rBGH should contact Rural Vermont at (803) 223-7222. A print copy of the list can be obtained from either of these sources.

View the current list on the Web at: [www.igc.apc.org/mothers/fieldwork/mo\\_field\\_milklist.html](http://www.igc.apc.org/mothers/fieldwork/mo_field_milklist.html)

## **ACS Takes Stand on CODEX Pasteurization Policy**

The American Cheese Society (ACS) has formed a task force to influence the international food rules (CODEX Alimentarius) currently being developed to govern trade in food products. The original draft of CODEX requires pasteurization of milk products. This practice is opposed by cheesemakers worldwide. ACS is looking for assistance from interested folks. Contact them at (414)728-4458. ACS has drafted a pasteurization platform, which is on the Web at: [www.cheesesociety.org](http://www.cheesesociety.org) (or call for a copy).

## **What's coming up in CreamLine:**

**Summer issue feature** -- Ice Cream for Fun and Profit

**Chef's Corner** -- In the next issue, Caterer/Chef Kelly Shepherd begins her column on dairy products and their uses in creative cooking.

**Forage for dairy animals** -- wild foods (weeds) can offer good nutrition for animals, according to the Noble Foundation in Oklahoma.

**Idea Exchange** -- readers' forum on small dairy issues, ideas, recipes, whatever!

**Book Reviews** -- books about Ben & Jerry's, and the new edition of Cheesemaking Practice

**Classifieds** -- buy and sell equipment, books, animals, etc. Up to 25 words, \$5 per issue for subscribers; add \$5 for each 25 words thereafter. Non-subscribers add additional \$5 to total.

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