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Bleating Heart Cheese: An Interview with Seana Doughty, Part II

Posted By [kirstin](#) On September 28, 2010 @ 9:56 AM In [Uncategorized](#) | [6 Comments](#)



Lily, a Bleating Heart Milker, all photos courtesy of Bleating Heart.

[Bleating Heart](#) ^[1] is one of the best sheep's milk cheeses available today, and cheesemaker Seana Doughty, who has the determination to drive from California to Wisconsin during winter to buy sheep, and the humor to name her wheels "Fat Bottom Girl," is a force to be reckoned with. After tasting her samples at Cowgirl Creamery and being blown away by the flavor produced by this first-time cheesemaker, I knew I wanted to interview her for "It's Not You, it's Brie." Because her story is so dynamic and fun, we're extending the interview to two posts- it's a long one, but her answers are fantastic. The interview was done via email, and my questions are in bold. This is the second interview. The first can be found here ^[2].

Tell us a little about how *Fat Bottomed Girl* is made. I love the story about how after it was left alone for a little while, you came back to the creamery to find that it had a thicker bottom and named it after the Queen song ode to fuller figures. What happens after the raw milk hits your creamery for this cheese? Do you add any molds to the wheels as is done with brie-style cheeses, or do you simply wash the rind and let it do its thing?



Fat Bottom Girl (all photos courtesy of Bleating Heart)

When I first conceptualized the cheese that became Fat Bottom Girl, I knew I wanted to create something sort of in between a Basque style sheep cheese and a younger Italian pecorino. I had the taste, texture, and size in my mind before I ever made the cheese. I knew it would be raw milk, and I knew it would be a small format. Once the raw sheep milk is in the vat, it's heated gently, then it's cultured with a blend of culture strains. I do not add any additional ripening molds or yeasts to the milk. When the desired pH is reached, rennet is added (I only use natural calf rennet). Once set, the curd is cut and allowed to rest for 10 minutes. At that point, I cook & stir the curd a bit, gently increasing the heat over a 45 min period. Once the texture of the curd is just right, I "hoop" the curd into their basket moulds, each wheel being imprinted with a heart. The tricky part is recreating the accidental fat bottom shape – which requires a timer and constant attention! I have to un mould the cheeses at just the right time or else the fat bottom might be too fat, or too skinny. That's actually one fun and truly artisan aspect of this cheese – it requires totally hands-on human intervention, you could never replicate that in a factory. These cheeses are allowed to fatten and acidify and when the

pH is right, they are brined and then aged for 60 days at 55F. During the aging process, the wheels are washed every 2 to 3 days with brine. The orange /yellow hue on the rind is from the development of B. Linens, which was in the environment. Unfortunately, I just did not have enough milk to make FBG this year, but it will return in 2011. I will definitely be playing Queen when that cheese is back in production.

How long does it normally take you to perfect your cheese babies (your new cheese creations)?

The quick answer: none – I just make the cheese. I have never spent any time doing experimental batches of any cheese that I've sold (with the exception of the soft unripened sheep cheese I was experimenting with so I could use the milk being produced before the dairy got licensed). In fact, I never made cheese at home or "practiced" at all before I began making cheese for commercial sale. I made some whole milk ricotta on the stove from time to time – that's it. I know this probably sounds completely ridiculous and quite cavalier, but it's the truth. Plus, with the very high price and scarcity of sheep milk, I could not afford to experiment, it just HAD to work!

Before you started making your own cheese, you worked in a Venissimo cheese in Del Mar. What was the final straw that inspired you, a girl who grew up eating Velveeta and who loves designer clothes and keeps tubes of mac lipgloss in her creamery, to leave cheesemongering and to make your own wheels?



Seana in Spain, buffing up her cheese (and charcuterie knowledge)

By the time I was an adult, Velveeta was but a distant unfortunate memory, and fine cheese had basically become its own food group for me. When I landed the gig at Venissimo, I was in heaven. I would've come to work there even if they didn't pay me. I was completely smitten and even further fascinated with cheese. Within weeks, I concluded that it was not enough for me to just know and sell cheese, I needed to make it, I had a burning desire to create something. I felt like I had finally figured out what I want to be when I grow up – a cheesemaker, but I had create my OWN cheese. I would not be satisfied to make cheese for someone else. I am also not ashamed to say that I pretty much always wear lipgloss, especially when I'm making cheese. I made cheese yesterday, and I of course wore lipgloss – MAC Viva Glam is one of my faves.

What other wheels do you see in your future?

I knew from the beginning that I wanted to make a mixed milk cheese, which I am currently producing. This cheese will be out in Fall 2010, it's called "**Trifecta**" and is a blend of 50% sheep, 40% cow & 10% goat milk. That cheese is loosely inspired by the local mixed milk tommes I had in France but definitely is not a copycat, its natural rind makes it unique to this environment. The name has a story – it is inspired by the largest gambling win I've ever experienced. A trifecta where you pick the 1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners in a race. This happened to me at the Del Mar horse races, which happens to be located about half a mile from Venissimo, the cheese shop I worked in, the gig that sparked this whole cheesemaking adventure. The cheese is sheep 1st, cow 2nd, goat 3rd....my true order of preference in cheeses.

I will definitely make a BLUE cheese once I have enough sheep milk, hopefully in a couple of years. I have always been a lover of blue cheese, in fact my cheese name at Venissimo was "Vamp de Valdeon" in honor of the amazing mixed milk leaf-wrapped blue cheese from Spain. I will certainly do a pure sheep milk blue cheese, and maybe a mixed milk blue.

Who are some of your favorite cheese folks you think we should be keeping an eye on?

My friend/cheese buddy [Megan Mulhern](#) ^[3], who I met at the Sonoma Valley Cheese Conference in Feb 2009, is someone you will likely be hearing about in the not-too-distant future. She and I became very good cheese buddies. She recently landed a job as a cheesemaker at Jasper Hill in Vermont, where she is making Bayley Hazen Blue (another excellent blue), but she has plans to eventually return to her native Texas and start her own cheese enterprise.

My friend Craig Ramini is another cheese buddy of mine....he is in the process of starting a water buffalo dairy in Tomales, right on the Marin/Sonoma County border. You will be hearing about him and his cheese soon, maybe even by the end of the year or early next year. Craig and I get together regularly for beer and cheesemaker moral support.

If someone told you they wanted to be a cheesemaker, what would you tell them?

The only thing I would say/ask is: "WHY???" – why do you want to be a cheesemaker?" Keep in mind that here is no one right answer to this question, but you do need to know the answer because trying times are ahead. Artisan cheesemaking, especially if you have your own dairy and animals, is DAMN HARD WORK so you'd better know just what's driving you before you go down this road. There WILL be days when your resolve is shaken to the core. Starting and running an artisan cheese business is not easy, it is not glamorous (lipgloss helps though), and it is not very financially lucrative, especially when you start to count up the total hours and the physical & emotional energy you devote to the various aspects of the business. I have never worked so hard in all my life, but have never been so excited about my work either. You need to have immense energy, extreme dedication, intense drive and the ability to cope with all the highs and lows that will come your way. There will be blood, sweat and tears, sometimes all in the same day, especially if you have dairy animals. Things may go wrong, or don't go as planned or expected, so you need to be flexible. Most of all, you must love love love making cheese, and you must love the cheese you make. If not, please don't bother. Oh and you need money too, the more the better.

Thank you Seana, for this wonderful interview.

If you have any questions for Doughty, leave them in the comments. I'll try to get you answers when she has time.

Have you had a chance to try Bleating Heart?



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[1] Bleating Heart: <http://itsnotyouitsbrie.comwww.bleatingheart.com/>

[2] here: <http://itsnotyouitsbrie.com> <http://itsnotyouitsbrie.com/bleating-heart-cheese-interview-seana-doughty>

[3] Megan Mulhern: <http://twitter.com/megscupcake>

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