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Praise Cheeses

How the North Bay became a cheesemaking mecca

BY STETT HOLBROOK

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Sara Sanger

Joel and Carleen Weirauch of Weirauch Farm

We're living in the golden age of cheese.

Just as California wine and beer rose from forgettable mass-produced plunk and suds into fine beverages that can compete on a world stage, artisanal, hand-crafted cheese from Marin and Sonoma counties has established the area as one of America's premier cheese regions.

There are now more than two dozen North Bay cheesemakers and two cheese festivals.

The grassy hills of western Sonoma and Marin counties have been home to herds of dairy cattle and dairies since the mid-19th century. Swiss-Italian and Irish immigrants lured to the San Francisco Bay Area during the Gold Rush knew they had found something special when they gazed upon the sparsely forested green hills around Petaluma, Marshall and Tomales.

Cool, foggy weather and abundant water meant grass grew nearly year-round, perfect for the dairy cattle that would produce thousands of gallons of milk and tons of butter for the burgeoning city of San Francisco and for California at large. Even before the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, West Marin dairymen would ship their milk and butter out of the Petaluma River and Tomales and Drake's bays into nearby San Francisco harbors.

But in spite of all that milk being produced, there wasn't much cheese. Petaluma's Marin French Cheese Co. dates back to 1865 and is America's oldest cheesemaker, but few others followed suit. America was not a cheese-eating country—at least not of very good cheese. Commodity cheese—big blocks of cheddar, jack and rubbery mozzarella—ruled the land, and all those other fancy cheeses came from across the Atlantic. Of course, there were notable exceptions. Sonoma's Vella Cheese Co. opened in 1931. Matos Cheese Factory, Laura Chenel and Redwood Hill came much later, and were part of the first wave of artisanal cheeses.

But over the past 15 years, a new era has begun, thanks to a combination of a few key personalities, a rich dairy history, wise land-use policies and a shift in America's culinary Zeitgeist.

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The cheese aging room at Weirauch Farm and Creamery was once a portable classroom.

The Catalyst

Sue Conley's timing was impeccable. As cofounder in 1997 of Cowgirl Creamery, one of the first local cheesemakers to hit the big time, she and her partner, college friend Peggy Smith, have been instrumental in the North Bay's cheese revolution. But she didn't set out to be a cheesemaker. Conley was a cook who helped start Berkeley's beloved Bette's Oceanview Diner. Smith was a chef at Chez Panisse. Both had traveled to Europe and were smitten by the regional food there. Back in the Bay Area, Chez Panisse exerted a powerful influence on cooks and diners alike, who began to embrace what was then a novel concept: eating fresh, seasonal food from local farmers and purveyors.

"This was in the air," says Conley, a beaming, rosy-cheeked woman. "This was the time."

Conley fell in love with a park ranger who worked at the Pt. Reyes National Seashore, and in 1989 bought a house in Point Reyes Station. "That," she says now, "was really a great move."

It also proved to be a great move for the future of local agriculture and the incipient artisan cheese movement.

One day Ellen Straus knocked on her door in support of a candidate running for office. Straus, who died in 2002, was married to dairy farmer Bill Straus. Their son Albert was in the process of converting the family dairy to organic methods, making it the first organic dairy west of the Mississippi River. Straus was also a cofounder of the Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT), a nonprofit organization dedicated to permanently preserving farmland in West Marin. (Disclosure: my wife works for MALT). Conley had read about Straus in John Hart's book *Farming on the Edge*.

"I thought it was so cool she was in my house," she remembers.

Straus told Conley about the things her son Albert was up to and about MALT's work, making the point that it wasn't enough to protect local farms from development; it was critical to find new ways to keep these farms financially viable. Preserving farms and ranches was no good if the farmers couldn't make a living.

Filled with her local-food consciousness, Conley got an idea: she would borrow a concept long used in France, and bring regional foods under one tent for ease of promotion. "I thought I could be a marketer for local products," she says. "Otherwise, these farms would be gone."

But back then, there simply weren't many products to market. There was the



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oyster industry, the milk industry . . . And that was about it. She figured marketing shellfish would be a hassle, and there was no reason to market commodity milk, which is what most Marin County milk was.

So the first products she represented were Straus Family Creamery's organic milk, and cheese from some of the only local producers out there: Matos Cheese Factory, Santa Rosa's old-school maker of Portuguese-style St. George cheese; Sebastopol's Redwood Hill, a goat cheese producer; and Bellwether Farms, a pioneering sheep's milk cheese company in Valley Ford. She called her fledgling marketing and distribution company Tomales Bay Foods.

Conley spotted a barn for sale in downtown Pt. Reyes Station and bought it after selling her share of Bette's Oceanview Diner. She called her old friend Peggy Smith and asked if she wanted to join her in her new venture. Conley's idea was to turn the barn into a place for "3-D" marketing where customers could see and taste the foods from the region. And she had another marketing idea: why not make some cheese of her own, right there in the barn, so people could see how cheese was made?

And thus Cowgirl Creamery was born.

"We never meant to be great cheesemakers," Conley says. As a former cook, Conley figured she could make cheese—and by her admission, she made pretty good cheese—but she later hired more experienced cheesemakers who helped create the company's now famous Mt. Tam and Red Hawk cheeses, all made from Straus milk. Other cheeses followed.

The cheese was a hit, and Cowgirl opened a 400-square-foot shop on Fillmore and California in San Francisco. They soon outgrew it. In another stroke of good timing, the San Francisco Ferry Plaza was undergoing a remodel and looking for a lineup of premium local food purveyors. The local food movement was coming of age. Cowgirl Creamery was right in the middle of it all.

It took Conley and Smith eight years to make a profit, but in addition to stores in Pt. Reyes Station and San Francisco, there's now a Cowgirl shop in Washington, D.C. Between 1997 and 2006, all their fresh cheeses won first prizes at the American Cheese Society's annual competition. Tomales Bay Foods now represents about 60 cheesemakers. And in addition to her work at Cowgirl and Tomales Bay Foods, Conley chairs MALT's board of directors.

Cowgirl, now in its 15th year, shares its knowledge with new cheesemakers and currently produces about 156,000 pounds of cheese annually, infinitesimal by industrial cheese standards, but not too bad for an accidental cheese company in West Marin.

"Cowgirl was really the catalyst," says Lynn Giacomini Stray, marketing director for Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company, the wildly successful maker of Point Reyes blue cheese.

Giacomini Stray, who also serves on MALT's board, is one of Marshall dairyman Bob Giacomini's four daughters. The elder Giacomini is one of West Marin's most successful dairy farmers and served as president of the National Dairy Board. It's a business he learned from his father. A little over 12 years ago, Bob Giacomini called the family together to talk about the future of their 700-acre ranch and herd of 500 cows. While milk prices were holding steady, the cost of production was going up. Plus, 500 head of cattle was having an environmental impact on Tomales Bay, below the hilltop ranch. Giacomini's daughters had all moved away from the area, and there was no one in line to take over the family business.

"We knew we had to do something," remembers Giacomini Stray.

Bob Giacomini never liked seeing the milk trucks pull up at his ranch and leave for places unknown. "He really wanted a finished product that he could say 'This is what we did with our milk,'" Giacomini Stray says.

So why not make cheese? Better yet, why not make blue cheese? At the time, the only other nationally known producer of blue cheese was Maytag Blue. With a herd of their own, and with Cowgirl's example to inspire them, they got into the cheese business and reduced the size of their herd by 200. "I said, 'I'll come home for that,'" says Giacomini Stray.

The Fat of the Land

If there's a central theme to Cowgirl Creamery's story and local cheese in general, it's that there would be no cheese without local dairies—and local dairies require wide-open spaces for pasture. Given how close the grazing lands of Marin and Sonoma are to the urban center of the Bay Area, it's miraculous that way out West, cattle still outnumber people. But it's not an accident.

Development pressure to turn rolling hills into subdivisions or estate homes is massive. That's why MALT's work has been a key component in keeping local farmers on the land and local cheese and other products in stores. MALT does this by buying farmers' development rights and placing a permanent easement on the land that prevents paving over the pastures. The money farmers receive can be used to pay off debt and inheritance taxes or invest in new infrastructure. There are now 11 dairies and six creameries on MALT-protected land.



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Stett Holbrook

Marcia Barinaga says caring for sheep is what she loves most about being a cheesemaker.

But when Corey Goodman and Marcia Barinaga bought a hilltop ranch above Marshall, locals weren't sure what would become of the land, even though it had a MALT easement. Goodman and Barinaga, after all, weren't farmers.

Barinaga had a Ph.D. in microbiology and was a science writer for the journals *Science* and *Nature*. Her husband was a former professor at Stanford and Berkeley who started a biotechnology venture fund. They had a weekend home in West Marin, but decided to move to the area full-time. They bought an 800-acre ranch with striking views of Tomales Bay and the Point Reyes National Seashore, and built a house on it.

The deep-pocketed couple from the East Bay didn't strike locals as the ranching type. But it didn't take long for their worry to prove unfounded.

Barinaga's family is Basque, steeped in the tradition of sheep ranching; her cousin works on a sheep ranch in Idaho. After moving to West Marin, Barinaga

learned about MALT.

"We got more involved when we realized how important it was to keep every bit of land in production," she says. "We need ranches to be active. If you love West Marin, you love the agriculture. That is the community out here."

So she became a sheep rancher and a cheesemaker. Her move to West Marin allowed her to reconnect with her Basque roots—and make some outstanding sheep's milk cheese patterned after Spain's famed Idiazabal cheese. Together with an assistant, she makes about 6,000 pounds of cheese per year inside a shipping container converted into a creamery.

She made her first commercial cheese in 2009. Conley told Barinaga it was so good that she shouldn't change a thing. So she hasn't. Sheep milk is a seasonal product, and when it sells out, as it often does, it's gone. But Barinaga's herd of 85 ewes just starting lambing this month, meaning there'll be new cheese later this spring.

Like the Giacominis, Barinaga says the help from Cowgirl Creamery was critical.

"They are the most generous and community-minded people," she says. "It's almost like they were a partner in my business."

Before she moved to the ranch, Barinaga had never interacted with sheep before, but something in her family history and what she says is an innate connection with the animals awakened in her.

"The cheese is great, but for me it's not about the cheese first," she says. "I have an affinity for sheep. I like to say we're all descended from shepherds."

Because she has no children, people often suggest her love for her sheep is an expression of her maternal instinct. But she corrects them: "It's an expression of my pastoral instinct."



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Stett Holbrook

Capricious, an aged goat cheese, is the Achadinha Cheese Company's flagship cheese.

For Jim and Donna Pacheco in Sonoma County's Chileno Valley just outside of Petaluma, selling development rights to the Sonoma County Land Trust allowed them to keep the family farm.

With easement in place and cash in hand, they built a creamery and an aging room on their 240-acre ranch to make their exceptional aged goat cheese. (I tried a lot of cheese in the course of writing this story, and their Capricious cheese, a crumbly, raw milk goat cheese, was one of my favorites.) In a story similar to the Giacominis, the price of milk was flat while the cost of production was rising.

"Like a dog chasing its tail, we just kept going around and around," says Donna Pacheco.

Adding a commodity like cheese was a lifeline. "This is survival," she said. "This is how we make a living."

Instead of selling to stores who might not care for her cheese properly, Pacheco sells cheese at farmers markets—32 in all.

In addition to Capricious, Achadinha Cheese Company also makes a mixed goat/cow's milk cheese from a Portuguese family recipe called Broncha, which changes slightly from year to year, depending on the ratio of milk.

"It's consistently inconsistent," Pacheco jokes.

Cheese Teachers

While Cowgirl Creamery influenced a new generation of cheesemakers in Marin County, Sonoma County's cheese industry got a push from three pioneering women: Patty Karlin, Sheana Davis and Colette Hatch.

Karlin has been making goat cheese from her ranch and creamery in Bodega since 1984, making her one of the county's oldest cheesemakers. Nearing retirement now, she's actively looking to sell her operation, Bodega Artisan Cheese.

In addition to making some good cheese, Karlin opened her creamery doors to scores of young cheesemakers looking to learn the way of the curd. Some of her disciples include Saint Benoit Yogurt, Bohemian Creamery and Bleating Heart.

"She's been an incubator of young cheesemakers," said Dave Doughty, who makes sought-after sheep's milk cheese at Bleating Heart with his wife, Seana Doughty.



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Stett Holbrook

Bellwether Farms is a pioneer in the North Bay's cheese scene and the first sheep's milk cheese producer.

Sonoma's Sheana Davis is a one-woman cheese impresario. She started the Sonoma Valley Cheese Conference 10 years ago, a showcase of national and local cheese. She owns the Epicurean Connection, a cheese shop in downtown Sonoma and has taught home cheesemaking at the Sonoma Inn for 12 years. She's also helped launch or market more than a dozen cheese companies, including Redwood Hill, Bellwether and Matos. And she makes her own cheese, Delice de La Vallee, a fresh, triple-cream cow and goat's milk cheese, and Creme de Fromage, a triple-cream cow's milk cheese.

As a Sonoma native, her cheese roots run deep. She apprenticed under the late

Ig Vella, who started Sonoma County's oldest creamery, Vella Cheese Co. Vella died last year, and this year's cheese conference was dedicated to his memory. Davis keeps Vella's prized cheese knife framed in her shop.

Davis sees the North Bay's dairy industry coming full circle. Before industrialization and commodity markets, many dairy farmers made their own cheese. It wasn't sold commercially, but that changed as the industry got bigger and more mechanized and dairy operations moved to Central Valley. But the backlash against mass-produced food ushered in by Alice Waters and others created a new market for small-production milk and artisanal cheese.

"You're not going to make it selling commodity milk or cheese anymore," she says.

Even though there are now a growing number of local cheese companies, Davis doesn't think the industry has reached saturation yet. "We're still in our infancy," she says. "It's just the beginning."

In fact, Davis predicts there will soon be more local, dairy-based products other than cheese, like sour cream and kefir. She also surmises that we'll start seeing "dairy-designated" cheese, just as wineries tout a single vineyard.

More than anything, she says the industry needs to do a better job of banding together and marketing itself. "Strength in numbers," she declares. "That's how we're going to be able to grow together."

America at large doesn't have much of a cheese culture. For years, brie, gouda and green cans of dusty Kraft Parmesan cheese were about as fancy as cheese got. So when French-born Colette Hatch came to Sonoma County, cheese was the last thing on her mind. Like many others moving here, she was interested in wine.

But soon the East Coast transplant found herself setting up specialty cheese counters at Food for Thought (now Whole Foods) in Sebastopol, Santa Rosa and Petaluma. Given the lack of cheese available then, she didn't expect the cheese counter to take off.

"It was really the beginning of the awareness of local and well-made food," she says. "I'm coming from France, where local food is an everyday thing. Here it was new."

Little by little, she got shoppers to try cheese, educating them on what was then a foreign subject. And most of the cheese was foreign. "We didn't have any cheese in Sonoma County," she says. "I used to bring cheese from France."

But as the North Bay's cheese industry began to grow, so did a local cheese culture.

"I realized I was part of this big thing that was going on," she says. "I thought I was going to do wine, but something told me, 'Cheese is bigger than you think it is.'"

When Whole Foods acquired Food for Thought, she left. Hatch is now the cheese buyer at locally owned Oliver's Market, and acts as a gatekeeper and cheerleader for local cheese. She also teaches at the Cheese School in San Francisco and has a consulting business under the name "Madame de Fromage," a title bestowed upon her by a *Press Democrat* article years ago.

Right now, she's loving cheese from Penngrove's Weirauch Farm and Creamery. "Their cheeses are absolutely impeccable," she says. "They have no flaws."

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Stett Holbrook

Craig Ramini plans to start making fresh buffalo milk mozzarella this summer.

The Next Generation

Craig Ramini is a cheesemaker in waiting. Ramini didn't grow up on a farm or even near a farm. He's a high-tech refugee who chucked a successful career to become a cheesemaker. Only he's going about things a bit differently: he plans to make mozzarella from a small herd of water buffalo in Tomales.

To do so, he imported frozen buffalo semen from Italy and artificially inseminated his herd. Once the skittish, black-hided animals give birth and start producing milk, he'll become one of America's only buffalo's milk mozzarella makers. In six months, he hopes to have a small quantity of cheese available.

"I want to make one very rare Italian cheese," he said. "You can pull it off if you have a deep niche."

Ramini looks like a Silicon Valley type. He drives a Porsche Cayenne and has a well-dressed, casual-Friday style. In Silicon Valley startup fashion, he's tried to minimize his expenses by getting creative. He built his small creamery and milking parlor out of what was a bramble-covered, decrepit dairy facility on Stemple Creek Ranch, purveyor of grass-fed beef.

Because his beautiful cheesemaking facility is not yet making cheese, he's opened his doors to create a de facto cheese cooperative, serving as an incubator for new cheese talent, much in the same way as Karlin at Bodega Artisan Cheese. In fact, some of his cheese mates (Bleating Heart and North Bay Curds and Whey) came from Karlin's. They all pay a fee for use of his equipment, namely, a very nice-looking Dutch-made vat.

Building a creamery is expensive, about \$200,000. And even if you've got that kind of money, you also need a place to age your cheese. And you need milk. Sharing the costs makes a lot of sense for startup operations.

"A lot of people think he's nuts to do it," says Dave Doughty, one half of the Bleating Heart cheese team. "We're like Gypsy cheesemakers."

Alissa Shethar, the one-woman show behind the excellent North Bay Curds and Whey, drives all the way from Berkeley for her time in the cheese room.

Making cheese requires a sterile environment, so having multiple users in a facility could be trouble if they're not in sync with hygiene protocol. Plus, repairing a broken vat is expensive. But for Ramini, so far, so good.

Doughty and his wife age their cheese in a 120-square-foot, state-certified building just off their garage in Sebastopol. It's reportedly the smallest

milk-processing plant in the state, matching Seana Doughty's small red Mini Cooper perfectly.

"We don't have a problem selling our cheese," says Seana, who, in addition to working a full-time job in Novato and making cheese, is the president of the California Artisan Cheese Guild. "We have a problem of not making enough."

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Stett Holbrook

Cheesemaker Alissa Tappan, owner of North Bay Curds and Whey, is a member of a cheese co-op in Tomales.

In Petaluma, Joel and Carleen Weirauch are in the midst of their first lambing season. They raise a herd of 65 sheep on land they share with a chicken ranch. The Weirauch Farm and Creamery—Madame de Fromage's favorite—has been making cheese for less than year, and so far only with cow's milk.

Now that their ewes have given birth, the Weirauchs will be able to start making sheep's milk cheese later this spring, and should have some on the market by summer. Weirauch spent a year in France and fell for the distinctive flavor. "Once I tasted sheep's milk," he says, "I was blown away."

Like Weirauch's own cheese company, the North Bay's cheese industry is still young compared to other regions such as Vermont and New York. But Weirauch sees good things ahead.

"We're younger," he says. "We're up-and-comers. But in the next few years, it's really going to take off."

—

See Also: Artisan Cheesemakers in the North Bay

The Artisan Cheese Festival takes place Feb. 23–25 at the Sheraton. 75 Baywood Drive, Petaluma. For info, see www.artisancheesefestival.com.

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 Nice article...
One small correction: Weirauch Farm & Creamery is located in Petaluma, not Penngrove


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Posted by **Carleen Weirauch** on 03/14/2012 at 11:21 AM

 Thanks, Carleen. Fixed!


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Posted by **Gabe Meline** on 03/15/2012 at 1:38 AM

 Fantastic article. So proud of my sister Sue :)


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Posted by **Clare Conley** on 03/15/2012 at 10:45 AM

 Thank you Stett, for listening so well to my feelings about connection to community and to sheep. And for such a great article.


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Posted by **Marcia Barinaga** on 03/16/2012 at 9:42 PM

 For a full list of Sonoma and Marin artisan cheesemakers and to find which are open to the public for visits, check www.cheesetrail.org

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Posted by **Vivien Straus** on 03/20/2012 at 9:00 AM

 Enjoyed reading all about Northern California cheese and its history. Last weekend I took the kids out to a Tomales Bay Oyster -que with some friends and we stopped of at the Marin French Cheese Co. since it was on our way. Great experience for us all. They had lots of samples out for us to try and french bread for sale too. We sat by their lake and it was lovely. Thanks for the informative article.

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Posted by **Lynda Rael Jovanovski** on 03/21/2012 at 10:38 AM

 Wonderful article! Vella Cheese Co appreciates the coverage of the colorful history of the many artisan cheesemakers in our area. We are proud to be a part of the Northbay's cheesemaking mecca and contributing to the education of up and coming artisans in this Old World craft. Ig Vella started an in-house apprenticeship program and Vella Cheese is proud to have had 3 apprentice Cheesemakers in the last 30 years: Jeremy Catrambone, Jeffrey Catrambone and most recently, Ig's grandson, Gabriel Luddy.

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