

Artisan cheese makers abound in Sonoma and Marin

Janet Fletcher

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If Seana Doughty wants a motto for her new Bleating Heart creamery, she might consider "No Guts, No Glory."

Doughty's saga of transformation from bored office paper pusher to professional cheese maker has enough cliff-hanging plot twists for the big screen. Imagine Meg Ryan as the naive but indomitable cheese enthusiast who buys a used truck on Craigslist and corrals her sister for a road trip to Wisconsin, in a blinding snowstorm, to pick up her starter flock of pregnant ewes.

"Operation Sheep-o-Rama" is what Doughty calls her hair-raising adventure, and it's a good thing that most would-be cheese makers don't face similar tests of character or we wouldn't have many cheese makers. Instead, the Bay Area dairy fraternity has swelled in the last couple of years, with several new producers introducing creations in recent months.

Twenty years after Bellwether Farms made its first sheep's milk wheels in Petaluma, artisan cheese making in Marin and Sonoma counties has reached critical mass.

"It's hard to find a dairy in Marin or Sonoma that's not either looking at adding cheese making or transitioning to certified organic to increase revenue," says Sue Conley, co-proprietor of Cowgirl Creamery in Petaluma. The newly published Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail map lists 27 cheese makers in those two counties alone, up from seven - Conley's estimate - in 1997, when her creamery opened.

That's a remarkable trend line, a phenomenon that Conley pegs to the North Bay's many attributes as a dairying region.

"We have really good milk, really good grass, and really good multi-generational dairy families," she says. The Bay Area's growing number of passionate locavores has fueled the boom, too.

'Wonderful place'

"I think you can't ask for a more wonderful place to make artisan cheese," says Ellie Rilla, community development adviser for Marin County Cooperative Extension and author of an extensive study on North Bay artisan cheese making.

Doughty, whose fascination with sheep's milk cheese bloomed during a stint in a Southern California cheese shop, moved to Sebastopol in 2009 in the hopes of scoring some hard-to-find sheep's milk and

starting her creamery. She had no plans to own animals. Using sheep's milk purchased from Barinaga Ranch, a West Marin newcomer, and leased space in Barinaga's tiny creamery, Doughty made the first wheels for her Bleating Heart brand that summer.

But Marcia Barinaga's success with Baserri, an aged sheep's milk wheel, meant that Barinaga soon had no milk to spare. That's when Doughty realized that, to persist with sheep cheese, she would need her own sheep.

"When I have a roadblock, I chisel through it," says Doughty, who initially housed the Wisconsin ewes in her backyard. Eventually she persuaded a sheep-ranching couple in Sonoma County to provide a home for her growing flock and to join her as partners. Next year, the three expect to milk nearly 100 ewes.

Unlike Doughty, Karen Bianchi-Moreda comes from a dairying family, one with a century-long history in the North Bay.

A former physical [education](#) teacher, Bianchi-Moreda began experimenting with a cheese-making kit a couple of years ago in hopes of creating a niche for herself on the family's Sonoma County farm. Estero Gold, an aged wheel made with the farm's raw Jersey milk, was offered for sale at farmers' markets over the summer and is Bianchi-Moreda's tribute to the Italian table cheese that her grandparents loved.

"None of us knows what the cheese was under that little glass dome next to the wine decanter," says Bianchi-Moreda, "but Estero Gold is the closest I could get."

Boding well for the Valley Ford Cheese Co., Bianchi-Moreda's enterprise, both of her sons want careers on the farm. The older one, a recent dairy-science graduate, now makes the creamery's cheeses; the younger, a dairy-science student, hopes eventually to manage the cows.

Chance encounter

The new Bohemian Creamery, near Sebastopol, blossomed from a chance encounter. Lisa Gottreich and Miriam Block - both middle-aged and newly divorced - met at a party and discovered a shared enthusiasm. Gottreich, who owned goats, had been making cheese on her home stove for years; Block had purchased a cheese press and was hoping to start.

"There was never, strangely, any game plan, no 'Let's start a company,' " Gottreich says. "But it was no fun to make cheese in the kitchen anymore. What would it feel like to make larger batches?"

After getting a good response to their first cheeses, made in rented space with Gottreich's goat's milk, they decided to build their own facility. "I'm a risk taker anyway," Gottreich says, "but in a failing economy, this was one risk that was highly worth trying."

Bohemian Creamery was operational by the summer of 2010. Today, the two partners transform about 400 gallons of milk a week into a rotating roster of eight cheeses, some of them from purchased cow's and sheep's milk and most of them Italian inspired. Capriago, a goat cheese modeled on Asiago, was the partners' first cheese and remains a top seller. BohoBel, a cow's milk wheel, nods to BelPaese, a cheese Gottreich came to love during the years she lived in Italy.

Among the newcomers in Marin and Sonoma, Barinaga Ranch and Nicasio Valley Cheese Co. appear to have the most bankable business plans. Both are farmstead operations, meaning that they own their own livestock, guaranteeing them a supply of high-quality milk.

Marcia Barinaga, with a doctorate in molecular biology, has the scientific credentials that many cheese makers lack and a focused marketing concept. Her signature cheese, the raw-milk Baserri, is styled after the hard Basque cheeses of the Spanish Pyrenees, her grandparents' homeland. Her only other cheese, Txiki, is Baserri in a smaller size.

The Lafranchi siblings behind Nicasio Valley Cheese Co. are third-generation dairy farmers who entered the cheese business cautiously and methodically. Intending to make Swiss-Italian cow's milk cheeses that reflect their heritage, they engaged a Swiss-Italian cheesemaker to mentor them, then built a showplace creamery and adjacent retail shop to take advantage of agritourism in West Marin. Their cheeses - among them the Taleggio-like Nicasio Square and fresh, rindless Foggy Morning - made retail inroads immediately.

And more newcomers are in the wings. Joel and Carleen Weirauch have just completed their Petaluma creamery and milking parlor and expect to make sheep's milk cheese in the spring with milk from their 75 ewes. In the meantime, they have been producing fresh and aged cow's milk cheeses that they sell at farmers' markets.

Water buffalo

In the town of Tomales, in West Marin, Craig Ramini is completing a creamery and building a herd of water buffalo, and expects to sell his first mozzarella next spring. A former Silicon Valley software executive, Ramini says his Italian sister-in-law sparked his new venture when she complained, over dinner, that she couldn't find domestic mozzarella di bufala.

Reflecting the boom in North Coast cheese making, the College of Marin has a waiting list for its artisan cheese certificate program, now in its second year. Eleven students graduated in May, with a dozen more expected to complete the coursework - a series of six classes - this winter.

Training programs such as this one and more hands-on experience may help North Bay cheese makers overcome what some retailers say is a lack of consistency.

"New cheese makers are always going to be inconsistent," says Gordon Edgar, cheese monger at San Francisco's Rainbow Grocery and an early supporter of many of the newcomers.

"As consumers, we have to be willing to put up with it. But it's tricky because customers who buy a cheese they don't like aren't going to go back to it."

Milk changes with the seasons, and artisan cheese makers have to adapt, unlike industrial producers, which often standardize the milk protein and fat. Altering procedures to accommodate these differences is a big part of the cheese maker's learning curve. Then add the ever-present challenges of regulatory compliance, equipment maintenance and animal care.

"More important than having a plan is having flexibility," says Doughty, who maintains a full-time off-farm job.

"When I'm driving home on 101, and I'm changing gears from my desk job to cheese, I see a flashing road-construction sign that says 'Changing Conditions Ahead.' And every time I see that sign, I think, 'That's what it's like to be an artisan cheesemaker.' "

North bay newcomers

The Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail map is available in PDF format for download. Search online for "Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail."

Barinaga Ranch, Marshall. www.barinagaranch.com.

Makes Baserri (raw sheep's milk; Basque-style tomme); Txiki (Baserri recipe in a smaller format).

Bleating Heart, Sebastopol. www.bleatingheart.com.

Makes Fat Bottom Girl (raw sheep's milk; washed rind); Shepherdista (raw sheep's milk; natural rind); Sonoma Toma (cow's milk; natural rind).

Bohemian Creamery, Sebastopol. www.bohemiancreamery.com.

Makes BohoBel (cow's milk; Belpaese style); Capriago (goat's milk; Asiago style), BoDacious (goat's milk; bloomy rind).

Nicasio Valley Cheese Co., Nicasio. (415) 662-6200 or www.nicasiocheese.com.

Makes Foggy Morning (cow's milk; fresh, rindless), Formagella (cow's milk; bloomy rind), Nicasio Square (cow's milk; washed rind), Nicasio Reserve (cow's milk; Swiss-Italian mountain style).

Valley Ford Cheese Co., Valley Ford. (707) 293-5636 or www.valleyfordcheeseco.com.

Makes Estero Gold (raw cow's milk; Asiago style), Highway One (raw cow's milk; Fontina style).

Weirauch Farm & Creamery, Petaluma. (707) 347-9401 or www.weirauchfarm.com.

Makes Doubloon (cow's milk; crottin style), TommeFraiche (cow's milk; tangy semi-soft style).

- *J.F.*

Four cheeses to watch for

Fat Bottom Girl: Firm raw sheep's milk wheel with aromas of brown butter and caramel. Serve with quince paste and amontillado Sherry.

Capriago: Semi-firm aged goat's milk wheel with a dense, creamy texture; cooked-milk aromas; and a sweet finish. Serve with toasted walnuts and a brown ale or other malt-oriented beer.

Txiki: Firm aged sheep's milk wheel with aromas of caramel and damp cave and perfect sweet-salt balance. Serve with a Spanish red wine from Catalonia, such as Montsant or Priorato.

Foggy Morning: A soft, fresh cow's milk cheese, resembling a delicate cream cheese, with a pleasing tang and sour-cream aroma. Spread on bagels or toast, or dollop on pizza.

- *Janet Fletcher*

Where to find the products

The following shops often carry new North Bay cheeses, but availability can vary from week to week:

Cheese Plus, 2001 Polk St., San Francisco; (415) 921-2001 or www.cheeseplus.com.

Cheese Shop of Healdsburg, 423 Center St., Healdsburg; (707) 433-4998 or sharpannutty.com

Cowgirl Creamery, 1 Ferry Bldg., San Francisco; (415) 362-9354 or www.cowgirlcreamery.com.

Epicurean Connection, 122 W. Napa St., Sonoma; (707) 935-7960.

Oxbow Cheese Merchant, 610 First St., Napa; (707) 257-5200.

Pasta Shop, 1786 Fourth St., Berkeley; (510) 250-6005. Also 5655 College Ave., Oakland; (510) 250-6005 or www.pastashop.net.

Rainbow Grocery, 1745 Folsom St., San Francisco; (415) 863-0620 or www.rainbow.coop.

Whole Foods Market, many Bay Area locations.

Janet Fletcher teaches cheese-appreciation classes and is the author of "Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing, and Enjoying" and "The Cheese Course," both from Chronicle Books. Visit www.janetfletcher.com for a class schedule, or contact her at fletcher@foodwriter.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/10/16/FDHF1LB1OR.DTL>

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