

## Cheese ventures

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During the past two years, Craig Ramini of Tiburon has transformed himself from a jet-setting Silicon Valley software consultant into a mild-mannered water-buffalo rancher and cheesemaker.

Ramini, who is raising his own dairy herd of 30 water buffalo in west Marin County, hopes to be making small batches of mozzarella di bufalo — Italy's famous, fresh cheese — by this summer in his creamery near Tomales.



KENT PORTER / PD

At her small cheese-aging room next to her home in Sebastopol, Seana Doughty washes the rind on her Fat Bottom Girl cheese.

But that doesn't mean he's over the hump.

"I realize deep down inside that I haven't overcome all the challenges yet," he said. "I pushed the snowball about halfway up the hill, but it's going to get a little bit bigger and harder to push."

Cheese fanatics will get a rare peak into his fledgling operation during a tour Friday morning that kicks off California's sixth annual Artisan Cheese Festival.

While Ramini isn't ready to give a taste of his new cheese just yet, visitors can get up close to his herd and try some of the rich, creamy milk that gives the porcelain-white cheese its distinctive flavor.

"It's very tasty stuff," he said. "I drink it every morning. ... Its composition is much higher in fat and higher in protein (than cow's milk)."

Ramini has leased 25 acres from rancher Al Poncia for his water buffalo, who have been busy giving birth this winter, providing milk for Ramini to play with and calves for people to coo over.

"That's the part of the tour that attracts a lot of people," Ramini said. "They can't believe how gentle they are and how cute the babies are."

Truth be told, Ramini said, water buffalo are as affectionate as Labrador retrievers, once you get to know them.

"They run to me, they surround me and they fight for my attention," he said. "To get this love thing coming back is totally unexpected."

It was his innate love for big animals that convinced Ramini to leave the corporate world behind.

"There's something about the presence of large animals that gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling," he said. "I knew that made me happy."

As a child, the Boston native hung out at his grandparents' Italian restaurant. So he knew Italian food also made him happy. Creating his own fresh buffalo mozzarella, which is usually mostly flown in from Italy, was a no-brainer for the trend-conscious

entrepreneur.

“There are more and more people who are really concerned about the food miles,” Ramini said. “If you’re going to make something locally, this is the time.”

Ramini’s cheesy scheme took root in August of 2009. By the end of that year he had written a business plan, served as a cheese apprentice with a master mozzarella maker and purchased his first eight water buffalo.

Since then, he has been training his herd, who previously were raised for their meat, to go against their nature and become dairy animals. It’s been an uphill battle, but he’s making progress.

“We’ve designed our dairy barn like church,” he said. “It’s quiet, everybody moves slowly, and only good things happen there.”

Once he establishes a steady flow of milk, Ramini will unveil what he hopes will be a world-class, hand-crafted buffalo mozzarella.

But his long-term plan is even more ambitious. One day, he hopes to move his cheesemaking to San Francisco.

“I want tourists to look past the counter at a big glass window, and look at me stretching the mozzarella,” he said. “It’s a really cool show.”

Ramini also hopes to help other cheesemakers get off the ground. Seana Doughty of Bleating Heart in Sebastopol is currently making her sheep and cow milk cheeses at his creamery.

Now three years into her cheese start-up, Doughty has enough product this year to participate in the cheese festival’s marketplace this Sunday, where she will serve tastes of Mixtress, a blended cheese of cow’s and sheep’s milk.

A city gal who grew up in Orange County, Doughty got bitten by the cheese bug while working at a cheese shop in Del Mar. She took classes and read textbooks, then moved to Sebastopol and looked around for some sheep’s milk. It wasn’t easy. She finally tracked down a sheep dairy in Marshall and convinced them to sell her milk.

When that arrangement dissolved, Doughty had to get serious about raising her own dairy sheep. She ordered 10 bred ewes from a dairy co-op in Wisconsin, picked them up in her truck and kept them in her back yard.

Once the ewes gave birth, she partnered with Rex and Kerry Williams of Sebastopol to care, feed and milk the sheep at their ranch.

“Now we’re milking 42 sheep, and we’ll get to over 80 in April,” said Doughty, who still holds down a day job at the Buck Institute in Novato.

Doughty transports the milk to Ramini’s creamery in Tomales, then ages it for a few months in a room her husband built next to their home.

“We have an amazing climate with amazing grass, and being so close to the San Francisco Bay Area gives us access to a lot of customers,” she said. “It’s the best of all worlds.”

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