

# Artisanal Cheese

## It's Not Easy Being Cheese

**Will Ontario's artisanal cheese makers finally be able to ply their trade without mortgaging the farm?**

By Julia Rogers

WHY IS IT we Torontonians — with a spectacular wine region at our doorstep and 400,000 dairy cows on the hoof nearby — can't find a local cheese with the bovine barnyard pong our Hillebrand Trius Cabernet Sauvignon begs for?

After 150 years of cheddaring, it's not that we don't know how to make cheese. In 1893, the Perth Mite, a 1000-kilogram mammoth wheel, was lauded as the World's Largest Cheese, a record that stands today. By 1900, Ontario's 3,000 farm and cooperative cheese factories exported 100 million kilograms of cheese to the wider world. Obviously, Ontario cheese thinks big... but maybe that's the problem. With cheese, small-scale production is often so much better. Just compare the sleek and opulent Pied-de-Vent — teeming with farmhouse animal funk — to some supermarket offender, a kissing-cousin to shoe rubber, sporting vac-pack seam scars and a presidential seal of approval. No contest!

Pied-de-Vent is from Quebec, where a resurgence of artisanal cheese making began 20 years ago. Today, at least 300 of Canada's 400-plus cheese varieties come from Quebec, and over half the production is by micro-fromagers. According to Alain Besré, wholesale director of Montréal's Fromagerie du Marché Atwater, this staggering success required several leaps of faith.

"The government needed to see that supporting small cheese makers was economical," Besré says. "The cheese makers had to make the cheese and actually sell it!" As well, Eurocentric consumers needed to take a chance on local cheeses more expensive than Roquefort. Quebec's craft cheese industry has created more than 1,000 rural jobs and generates more than \$200 million in annual sales: results duly noted by Ontario's dairy sector. Besré predicts that the lure of these returns and the growth of consumer demand will fuel our own explosion of small-scale cheese making within the next few years.

Geoff Rempel, student cheese maker and member of the recently established Ontario Cheese Society (OCS), believes that

*On really extreme days, Julia Rogers thinks cheese is the reason for life on earth. In calmer moments, she is content to cut, wrap, smell, taste and talk cheese at her deli day job and her taste education events (www.cheeseculture.ca).*



About 150 sheep graze at Milky Way Farm near Georgian Bay.

our province's dairy industry must overcome serious structural hurdles before Besré's optimism is justified. Now, according to Rempel, the industry "succeeds mainly in keeping the big boys entrenched."

Central to his concerns is a critique of Ontario's milk-pool system, which requires that cow milk be sold to a marketing board, then resold to processors. Well and good for maintaining a stable price to dairy farmers, but with the Byzantine result that you can't simply milk your cows and make cheese. First you must pay (\$25,000 per cow!) to be allowed to profit from milk. Next you pay for its transport to your cheese-making facility. Finally, you require the right to process it into cheese... which you won't get. Total "processing quota" hasn't increased since 1965, and now is in the hands of fewer than 30 cheese factories.

If unobtainable milk isn't enough to hamstring development of a Mulmur Morbier, then consider the following: All non-farm cheese-making facilities must be built with separate lunchrooms and massive truck bays for milk pool deliveries. These stipulations render Rempel alternately bemused and bitter. "It would be nice not to have to instantly spend a half-a-million dollars just to start operating." For these reasons, Ontario's artisan output is exclusively from sheep and goat milk and mostly from on-farm producers — a situation the dairy board barely acknowledges, much less regulates.

Rempel's OCS colleague Jim Keith, of Back Forty Sheep Camp, worries that rigid rules hamper development of interesting cheeses. "[I fear] we've lost sight of the fact that good, safe, health-enhancing food can be produced on a small scale using simple time-honoured methods. Complex and expensive

technologies [can] pose a barrier to diversity and authenticity." Our standardized cheese plants are inhospitable sites for the spontaneous riots of mold and bacteria required to spawn something as good as Gorgonzola or Munster.

Fortunately, there is some positive news for budding fromagers with a craving for cow milk. Since 1989, one per cent of processing quota has been set aside through a joint federal/provincial program called the Innovation Support Fund. Although the application process is notoriously difficult, and that one per cent has never been completely distributed, 9 of 21 applicants from across the country were successful last year. Among the lucky were two Ontarians — Margaret Morris, Glengarry's doyenne of dairy arts, and Wayne Philbrick, winemaker at Malivoire, each with the skills and savvy to create viable products within their five-year grant period. Expect them soon to delight us with straw-aged petits Camemberts and rosy disks of Guernsey richness.

Innovation grants are a first step toward growing the artisanal cheese sector, *See Ontario Cheese, page 22*

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## All hail goat and sheep

While change ambles slowly toward the cow barn, creativity gambols through Ontario's goat and sheep pastures. Goat and sheep milk are ideal for conveying flavour and character. Milky Way, C'est Bon and Mornington offer plain and flavoured fresh chevre and brebis for breakfast indulgence and culinary fun. Monforte juggles an impressive variety of evocatively named cheeses: Piacere, Paradiso, Toscano... Ewenity Co-op likewise appeals to cosmopolitan tastes — Ramembert, anyone? Back Forty presents four classics in raw Icelandic sheep milk. Alas Dalhousie, Madawaska, Highland Blue and Flower Station Feta appear in teasingly tiny releases.



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