

# Cheese Making

## What a Friend We Have in Cheeses

**A tale of making cheese, finding friends and creating Ontario artisanal food, as told by a guy behind the gal at Monforte Dairy Company**

By Brendan Howley

TAKE A PICTURE of this: two city folk in their Canadian Tire wellies standing ankle-deep in November mud in a cornrow in Mennonite country, in the hills near St. Jacobs, Ontario. It's a windy day, so you can feel the breath of the two enormous Belgian draft horses standing behind you, chawing down on the dry, hand-picked corncobs two young Amish farmers, Elijah and Aaron, tossed them for winter feed.

The two city folk — that'd be Monforte proprietor and cheese maker Ruth Klahsen and me (her guy Friday), two-thirds of Monforte Dairy Company (Ruth's son Ben Szoller is also a partner) — have a real problem. It's almost winter and we make cheese for a living. Sheep's milk cheese... and therein lies the rub: You can't make cheese without milk and you can't get much milk from sheep mid-autumn. They lactate but 10 months of the year, unlike cows and goats.

Today, we're here to buy sheep's milk from our band of Amish shepherds: Elijah and Aaron are the two youngest.

We have one advantage: Ruth has an excellent reputation with our shepherds — we trade fairly with them, via contracts that see them paid better than Quebec rates and we buy all the milk they produce. In the past, other dairies have sometimes really kicked these guys around.

Aaron and Elijah won't be photographed, but take it from Ruth, these two are handsome as they are silent. The dialogue goes something like this:

Ruth: Can you guys help us with some milk?

[20 seconds of silence. You can hear the wind blowing through the corn stalks and the sucking of the mud under your wellies.]

Aaron: Welllll....

Elijah: The ice.

The Amish beam at one another, amused we haven't thought of this wrinkle.

Ruth: I'll buy you ice.

Elijah: That'd cost you money.

This isn't just native Amish frugality: We have a real problem. The Amish don't use electricity, of course, and have no phones either, which is why we're perched on this hillside in a November crosswind in the first place. I can hear the Belgians breathing

*Brendan Howley once spent a baffling morning wandering Paris' St-Germain cheese market, not recognizing a single cheese. His third novel, The Witness Tree, will be published by Random House in 2006.*



Ruth Klahsen tipping freshly made curds into cheese forms.

while we all stare off into space. One of the Belgians nudges me square in the back, just being friendly. He grunts, chomping on a corncob. I look over my shoulder. Those teeth are big.

Lack of ice could be a deal-breaker. Our shepherds store their fresh milk in scrupulously clean stainless steel tanks — all chilled to perfection in lake ice harvested the winter before and still going strong, some years, well into June, in beds of sawdust. You have to see this to believe it, a whole piggyback sea-truck container packed with lake ice... but it works beautifully.

Aaron: I think David has some ice.

Ruth: This late?

Aaron: Welllll....

David Hundertwasser is the local Amish elder and spokesman for our group of eight Amish shepherds. He and his family of 14 live about five miles away, in what Ruth and I call the "village of Hundertwasser," a farmstead so crowded with jammed-together outbuildings the place looks like the set of Fiddler on the Roof.

Ruth: OK. We'll use David's ice. Do you want me to get it to you?

Aaron: Welllll....

[Another 20 seconds of silence. There's a murder of crows cawing overhead, just for atmosphere. The Belgian nearest me is gnawing on a rock-hard corn cob, making noises like bones breaking.]

Aaron: We'll talk to David. No point in you coming all the way out here...

Ruth [smiling]: So there's milk, then?

Elijah: If we got the ice, we can probably get you maybe 50 litres.

Aaron: Maybe a little more. A little.

Ruth: How much?

Aaron: Welllll....

We all laugh at Aaron's comic timing. There's a brief Dutch auction, as Ruth edges the deal to a close, but again, there's a reason for this. The Amish are honour-bound not to commit to any dealing they're not certain they can complete.

We all shake hands. After a half-hour of gentle probing and more pauses than a Pinter play, Aaron and Elijah and Ruth reach an understanding. We've raised some 90 litres of milk, a pittance, but enough to see us through this autumn's shortfall.

We live to make cheese another day.

OUR MICRO-DAIRY isn't nearly so romantic as the open-air sheep's milk bourse on Elijah's farm: our minuscule enterprise most resembles a Soviet tire factory, with its stuttering fluorescent strip lighting, film noir fans and odd zigzag layout. We share space with a far bigger goat's milk co-op, with our artisanal workspace but a fraction of the dairy's floor plan. Nonetheless, it's home to Ruth's single cheese making vat and our ripening room, where Ruth's cheeses age and grow beautiful.

Cheese making is a slow, sensuous and very hard physical craft; in antiquity a woman's task, cheese making has only very recently been industrialized. Ruth's theory is a good one: cheese making became man's work with the advent of cheddar, really the first cheese in the West to be made in industrial quantities. (Ruth ought to know. For years she was a chef and an instructor at the Stratford chefs' school, a self-confessed "stroppy woman" in a



(L) Toscano, Ruth's 'tomme de Savoie' variant, aging benignly. (R) A prototype aged cheese awaits its debut on a ripening room rack

very masculine world — and a political businesswoman to boot, her staunch Russian Mennonite roots the bedrock for Monforte's future as an ethical regional microproducer.)

All our cheeses are quite literally handmade. They have Ruth's thumbprints all over them. Our make-room, where Ruth will transform the milk into a gorgeous supple curd in our single vat en route to our various cheeses, is a big space, half the size of a high school gym, high-ceilinged and alternately chilly and steam-bath hot.

In a single day, Ruth will transform some 1,200 litres of sheep's milk into the beginnings of our cheeses, from our oldest, our trademark Toscano, which we age to six months and beyond, to our superb fresh ricotta and pecorino fresco, delivered to restaurants and stores all over the GTA and southwestern Ontario within two days of its birth. We make Canada's only authentic sheep's milk, called Halloumi. Those are real mint

*See Shepherds Ship page 27*

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