

In This Issue:

1. New "Starting a Cheese Factory Checklist" Aims to Help Dairy Entrepreneurs
2. Harmony Specialty Dairy Foods Offers Cheesemaker Internships
3. Wisconsin Food Companies Invited to the Midwest Buyers Mission
4. Upcoming Events

1. New "Starting a Cheese Factory Checklist" to Help Dairy Entrepreneurs

*By Tom Johnson
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Twelve years ago, my wife Kristi and I decided to leave our professional jobs and open an artisan cheese factory. Our venture wasn't the product of a lifelong passion, nor was it based on our abundant specialized knowledge or experience. In essence, it just seemed like a cool thing to do. My previous job had come to a close, and I was in need of a new project. Microbreweries were popping up all around us in Colorado, and small fortunes were being made. We thought, if beer, why not cheese?

As it turns out, there are plenty of reasons. But those are topics for other articles. The subject of today's article is this: once we made the decision to become artisan cheesemakers, we quickly proved how unprepared we were for meeting the challenge of starting our business.

It seemed easy enough at first. We simply opened a bank account, deposited \$100,000, and set about tackling obstacles as they appeared before us. Several months later, when Bingham Hill Cheese Company finally produced its first batch of Rustic Blue, we were sleep-deprived, out of money, and behind the eight ball.



As a DBIC consultant, I've had the opportunity to counsel dozens of families with similar ambitions. The burgeoning artisan cheese movement has attracted entrants from all walks of life: lawyers, veterinarians, truck drivers, printing magnates, even a few actual cheesemakers. As I've gotten to know these people, I've been comforted to learn that Kristi and I are not alone. Most of us don't have a clue about what is involved in getting started.

I'm not suggesting that outsiders should steer clear of cheesemaking. The diverse backgrounds of our colleagues add life to our industry. Those of us who come to cheesemaking from other fields are often more creative, since we're unconstrained by decades of tradition or habit. Our eyes are still wide opened. We take chances and make serendipitous mistakes.

But we take chances and make mistakes where it hurts, too. We don't understand the value of planning. We are ignorant about food safety and regulatory requirements. We don't protect our trade secrets. We disregard our competition. Most importantly, I've found that new artisans invariably underestimate the time and money required to open their businesses. And by doing so, they unfortunately decrease their chances of success.

This realization hit home recently while I was consulting with a dairy family in Wisconsin. The couple and their three children milk Holsteins on land that has been in the family for more than 100 years. Their land is located near an affluent community and has increased significantly in value. The family is comfortable but restless. They see cheesemaking as a way to add value to their product and create for themselves a new and exciting lifestyle. And they are willing to gamble the family property to finance their dream.

I sat with the family around their kitchen table and listened to their plans. I was floored by how little they understood about what they were getting into. They instantly reminded me of me. And that worried me greatly.

On the airplane that night, I wrote out a list of key steps I thought they were neglecting to consider and attached numbers to them. Cost. Time. Sequence. My list became quite long, so I broke the tasks down into categories: construction, equipment, regulatory, financial, business systems, marketing, and sales. The next day, I added more steps to the list, and in the weeks that followed, it became bloated. As it turns out, a great deal of work goes into starting a cheese factory.

I thought about my own experience, wherein we approached obstacles serially until they were conquered and spent money and time until they were gone. How much easier it would have been had we started with a checklist that forced us to consider not only the steps that would be required, but who was going to complete each step, how long it would take, and how much it would cost.

It would have been even better had we then used that information to create a timeline to ensure that all the steps were completed in the most efficient order possible. A timeline could have organized the process such that when our doors opened, all systems were in place, contracts were signed, regulatory requirements were met, and our bank account was still flush.

It then dawned on me that no one should have to start a business as we did. And perhaps I could do something to help ensure that nobody else did. As Danish physicist Niels Bohr once said, "an expert is a person who has made all the mistakes in a very narrow field." If true, that would make me a bona fide expert at starting a cheese factory.

I decided to put my hard-won expertise to use for the benefit of would-be cheesemakers everywhere, who, like me, are otherwise destined to start with one hand tied behind their backs. I set about creating an Excel spreadsheet that details the major steps involved in getting started in the business of cheesemaking. For each step, I left empty fields where the user must enter who will complete the task, how long it is expected to take, and how much it will cost. The total financial and time budgets are then calculated automatically.

The spreadsheet is not intended to educate the user about the finer points of developing a HACCP plan or how to analyze competing products in the marketplace. It only suggests that those are steps that need to be taken. It is up to the user to sufficiently educate him/herself about the hows and whys of doing so.

When used properly, the spreadsheet might help aspirants avoid surprises. They'll have a system of accountability for ensuring that nothing slips through the cracks. They'll have a rough budget. They'll know more or less how long it will take to reach their destination. And their marriages might still be intact.

The simplicity of the spreadsheet belies the complexity of the underlying work that must be done. It's one thing to suggest that product selection should be based on a market study. It's another thing altogether to commit yourself to purchasing all the products in a given category, analyzing them on price, quality, unit size, and special attributes, and then assembling the results of your analysis in a table for review.

This deeper look could scare a few would-be cheesemakers away from the profession altogether. And perhaps that's for the best, since no one should go into cheesemaking unless they're willing to face the mountains of work and expense that come along with it.

I expect my spreadsheet to be a dynamic document that improves over time. I've surely left out some important steps. Maybe you've encountered a few surprises along the way that would add utility to the document. I welcome your comments and encourage you to share your start-up horror stories. I'll update the spreadsheet until we hit the bull's-eye. Or at least until we're not missing the dartboard with every throw. The spreadsheet is available on the DBIC website: www.dbicusa.org

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2. Harmony Specialty Dairy Foods Offers Cheesemaker Internships

In an effort to help students and beginning cheesemakers looking to secure apprenticeship hours to earn their Wisconsin Cheesemaker's License, Harmony Specialty Dairy Foods, in Stratford, Wis., has started a cheesemaking internship program at its cheese plant in central Wisconsin. The program aims to fill a gap in Wisconsin for budding cheesemakers who have taken the required courses, but need to fulfill the required 240 hours of apprenticeship under a licensed cheesemaker.



Harmony Specialty Dairy Foods owners Ralph and Sharon Bredl decided to launch the program after being approached by several beginning cheesemakers looking for a well-established cheese plant to learn the trade. The family-owned cheese plant crafts British-style cheeses including Abergele, Caerphilly Style, Ale Caerphilly, Cheshire Style and Double Gloucester Style. The company also makes low

moisture, part-skim Mozzarella, whole milk pizza cheese, Muenster, Monterey Jack with Jalapenos and Kidwelly Castle – a British version of Parmesan.

“Our cheese plant is blessed with a nice little cheesemaker’s house dating back to the 1940s and ‘50s,” Ralph Bredl says. “Part of it is an office, and part of it is suitable for someone to live in. It’s perfect for an intern to stay in while working at the plant.”

Bredl says interns will be responsible for a variety of tasks, but their primary focus will be to learn and be involved in the company’s cheesemaking process, including time making cheese in vats, cut and wrap, and potential sales opportunities at farmers’ markets..

“The goal is for an intern to gain exposure in everything from the cheesemaking process to the conversion and packaging, all the way to the sales and marketing. They should get a taste of all three,” Bredl said.

While hosting a cheesemaking intern will be a new experience for the Bredls, they have plenty of experience in mentoring young people in the dairy industry. The family has hosted more than 40 students from around the world at their Harmony-Ho dairy farm since 1990. The look forward to replacing the farm internship program with a cheesemaking internship program. To learn more or to inquire about cheesemaking internships, email Ralph Bredl at ralph@harmonyspecialty.com or call 715-687-4236.

3. Wisconsin Food Companies Invited to Midwest Buyers Mission

Food buyers and importers from more than 20 countries will gather in July for the 2011 Midwest Buyers Mission. Sponsored by the Food Export Association of the Midwest USA, and hosted in Minnesota by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, meetings will be held all day on Tuesday, July 26 at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Minneapolis, and July 28-29 in Chicago.



The Midwest Buyers Mission will allow Midwest food companies to meet with buyers/importers from all over the world (22 markets) for a participation fee of only \$150. Companies can choose 25-30 minute pre-arranged meetings with up to 10 buyers/importers, who have been invited from Algeria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, Nicaragua, Palestine, Philippines, Singapore, Barataria-Trinidad & Tobago, the UAE, and Vietnam. Buyers will travel to Chicago following the Minneapolis meetings.

The event would be good for any size food and ingredient company that already exports, and is an exceptional opportunity for small-to-medium companies who might be investigating export for the first time. New exporters are strongly encouraged to sign up early to take advantage of “Trade Event Preparation Service” (FREE individual assistance from an export educator) provided by Food Export Midwest, prior to the event.

The deadline for registration is July 11. Sign up for the event online today or to view a more detailed description of buyer profiles here: [Midwest Buyers Mission](#). Call Brian Erickson at 651-201-6539 or email brian.j.erickson@state.mn.us for more information.

4. Upcoming Events

- **June 25: WI Blue Ribbon Cheesemakers Train. Mukwonago, Wis.**

The Elegant Farmer hosts a new Wisconsin Blue Ribbon Cheesemakers' Train on June 25, from 1 – 3 p.m. Three of the 2011 U.S. Championship Cheese Competition Winners will be on board, including cheesemaker Katie Hedrich, LaClare Farms; Paula Homan, Red Barn Family Farms; and cheesemaker Brenda Jensen, Hidden Springs Creamery. Come ride the rails in a beautifully restored, vintage East Troy Electric Railroad's Dinner Car. Tickets are \$35 and include on-board samplings of cheeses, beverages, a dessert tasting featuring Red Barn's signature milk paired with a slice of The Elegant Farmer's famed Apple Pie Baked in a Paper Bag and a take home goody bag including cheeses and an individual apple pie. More info: www.elegantfarmer.com



- **July 10-12: Summer Fancy Food Show. Washington, D.C.**

North America's largest specialty food & beverage Event features 180,000 products including confections, cheese, coffee, snacks, spices, ethnic, natural, organic and more. A total of 2,400 exhibitors, with 80 countries represented and 24,000 attendees. More info: www.specialtyfood.com

- **July 16: All-Star Blue Ribbon Tasting. Wisconsin State Fair Park, West Allis. Wis.**

Join the Wisconsin State Fair Park Foundation for an All Star Blue Ribbon Tasting, celebrating Wisconsin specialty meats, cheeses and spirits. Taste more than 30 Wisconsin State Fair blue-ribbon specialty meats and cheeses, paired with complimentary award-winning Wisconsin beers and wines, plus a special State Fair dessert table! The All Star Blue Ribbon Tasting is a



fundraiser for the Wisconsin State Fair Park Foundation. Proceeds help support youth programming and scholarships. The event is sponsored by the Wisconsin State Fair Dairy Promotion Committee. Info: blueribbontasting.com

- **August 3-6: American Cheese Society Annual Conference. Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

The beautiful city of Montréal in Québec, Canada will play host to ACS's 28th Annual Conference & Competition, marking the first time that the annual event will be held outside of the United States. More info: www.cheesesociety.org/conference.

The **Dairy Business Innovation Center** offers technical assistance to dairy producers and processors in developing value-added dairy products, business planning and market development. For more information, visit www.dbicusa.org or contact Jeanne Carpenter at 608-358-7837, email: jeanne@wordartisanllc.com.

This publication is made possible through tax-supported funding from USDA, Rural Development.



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