

**Raw Milk Cheese Discovery Session- Group Brainstorm Summary**  
**July 14, 2009, 10:15am-3:00pm**  
**Michael Fields Agriculture Institute**  
**East Troy, WI**

Participants in the discussion: Jim Gage-DBIC, Norm Monsen-DATCP/DBIC, Gigi Cazaux-DATCP, Kelly Sime-DATCP/DBIC, Heather Brooks-DATCP/DBIC, Jim Cisler-DATCP/DBIC, Laura Elliott-DATCP, Jeanne Carpenter-DBIC, Al O'Brien-Mt Sterling, Mary Falk-LoveTree, Terri Wenger-DATCP/ FS, Steve Pechacek- Next Generation, Dan Carter, Jane Carter, Willi Lehner-Bleu Mont, Bill Anderson-Fromagination, Agela Abdallah-Pastoral, Will Hughes-DATCP, Carla Kostka-Castle Rock, Wayne Kostka- Castle Rock, Andrea Neu-DBIC, Barry Elkins-World Import Distributors, John Jaeggi-CDR, Dean Sommers-CDR, Shirley Knox-Maple Leaf Cheese and Edelweiss Creamery, Jeff Wideman-Maple Leaf Cheese and Edelweiss Creamery, Peter Haage-DATCP/FS, Diane Collins-Next Generation, Greg O'Neill-Pastoral, Bob Wills-Cedar Grove, Larry and Clara Hedrich- LaClare Farm, Jerry Heimerel-Saxon Creamery, Jeska Brodbeck-DBIC

## **Concerns**

- Terms and definitions
  - Everyone has different views of raw milk. What is the real definition?
    - Raw milk cheese is anything that is processed anything under 145 degrees for 30 min or 161 degrees for 15 seconds.
    - The term “heat treatment” is misleading to consumers.
  - A consumer in the focus group said that ‘raw’ meant ‘unfinished’ to her. Rename the term? ‘Unpasteurized’ instead?
  - Trends – Artisan, organic, etc.
    - We’ve seen the danger of what’s happening to the organic industry in the marketing costs, when/if this becomes a movement we know that the big companies are going to demand more of the same, they don’t want change. This should be part of our planning that we don’t start a market and the rules change and the industry disappears.
    - Consumers want terms that mean something. Artisan is completely out the window, and farmstead is slowly going in the same direction. We have to have terminology that will be consistent. Confusion drives people nuts and makes more people hesitant to buy the product.
    - I’ve seen the WMMB logo slapped on every piece of cheese in WI, including all commodity cheese. The term ‘artisan’ doesn’t mean anything anymore.
- Regulations
  - Different states have different laws on raw milk cheese.
  - We need science-based regulations.
    - The CDR has done very little with raw milk cheese.
    - Cheesemakers need more information on whether testing for primary pathogens is sufficient.
- Health risks and consumer education

- What is the digestibility of pasteurized vs raw milk?
  - Raw milk is more digestible because it has the lipase enzymes. That's what makes the sheep milk more digestible. Quite a few of my customers have issues with pasteurized milk.
  - I talk with a lot of customers who can't digest cheeses that have been pasteurized.
  - I think the quality of the milk has gotten better and consumers' stomachs have become less resilient.
- Education
  - Consumers should receive correct info about raw milk cheeses. Some pasteurized soft cheeses are more dangerous than 2-year-old raw milk aged cheddar.
    - If pasteurized milk comes into contact with a pathogen before the cheese-making process, that pathogen has free range, unlike raw milk which has a defense against some of those pathogens. If raw milk is handled safely, it can be a great product.
  - In Europe, consumers are more aware of raw milk cheese and need less education on it.
    - In France, for example, milk is not heated above 104 degrees, and it is widely accepted in the country.
  - If you ask 20 doctors about raw milk cheese, you will get 12 different answers. We are working with ACS on getting an outreach program to advise consumers on raw milk cheeses.
- Pricing, Marketing and Sales
  - Difficult to price raw milk cheese
    - When you go through the extra work of making a special product, there's more money in it, and everyone wants a hand in the profit, which inflates the price.
    - At Whole Foods in TX this weekend if you have raw milk cheese labeled as "raw milk" your sales will increase 30%. That lends itself to the price. I personally feel when it comes to pricing a product; the purpose of raw milk cheese is to present quality flavor and product. When we think about pricing we have to think about the bigger segment of the market place. Need to price it so more of the public can get a part of the product.
  - Raw milk should remain an artisan cheese. Opposed to raw milk cheese as a commodity cheese.
  - Labeling
    - There is no consistency of what needs to be on the label for raw milk cheeses.
    - I would like to see a label saying mildly heat-treated to differentiate so the consumer doesn't feel like they've been lied to and so it doesn't hurt us all in the end

- Cheesemakers who produce raw milk cheese that has not been heat treated face more risk, but everyone that produces raw milk cheese gets to call it that (even if a producer decides to heat it up to 159 degrees, which is almost the temperature of pasteurized milk.)
  - Consumer perceptions
    - Traceability
      - It is critical to consumers' acceptance and feeling of safety to know the source of the milk of their raw milk cheeses.
      - The marketing and communication that goes out to the consumer about the farm and the farmer is very important.
- Sourcing
  - I think it's crazy to make a raw milk cheese from multiple herds. If the farm isn't sparkling, you have to be extra cautious.
  - With the market demand you can't have a product without multiple sources.
  - A single source is very crucial.

## Opportunities

- Increasing demand
  - 5 years ago there were only ¼ of today's number of plants making raw milk cheese. Raw milk cheese demand has grown remarkably.
- Does raw milk cheese taste better?
  - At what point are the enzymes denatured? The research I've done, raw milk heated above 120 degrees doesn't taste like raw milk anymore.
- Consumers that want raw milk cheese are typically very educated about it.
- As an industry leader, Wisconsin should take the opportunity to set the bar.
  - There is a huge opportunity for WI to give the consumer a better understanding of raw milk cheeses, but if other areas of the country don't address the issues as well, then the definition of raw milk cheese will continue to stay murky. When there is a better clarification, then it's easier to sell the cheese.
  - If we don't do something to get ourselves on board, it will come from the marketplace.

## Wrap Up (Note: Each bullet point is a statement from a different attendee)

- Now I understand why we haven't been as successful as an industry to promote raw milk. We still need to come to a conclusion amongst ourselves.
- I'm amazed at so many opinions and a lack of facts on raw milk cheese.
- There's a lot of knowledge in this room, but I think there are a lot of facts that in a discussion like this are missed.
  - How much would you charge for a piece of cheese with a pathogen? Nothing. What will that piece of cheese sold to the unknown public cost you? Your livelihood.

- We have the best farmers, the best milk, and the best cheesemakers. We should have more meetings and develop a testing protocol. Vermont is ahead of us a little on this. Raw milk can be safe; we can test for it. It's been around for thousands of years. I feel like this is the last preservation of small farmers. I hope that people are concerned enough to go with it.
- This is a very complex issue. I see a need for standardized protocols for testing cheeses during the aging process. This will take some risk out of the raw milk factor. Johnne's is the scariest thing because it can appear in even pasteurized milk.
- HASP plans. We need those. If you get a plan in place and do your testing you create a safer product.
- WI is the place for innovation because we have small, medium, and large farms and we all learned to get along together. We have commodity cheese, artisan cheese and specialty cheese and we all get along together. Because of our infrastructure and camaraderie, we get along and work together.
- I've heard a lot of discussion of cheese that isn't pasteurized and isn't raw- no matter what you label it, the consumer will accept the labeling. If you do label it, we as the final step can introduce it and educate the consumers about it.
- I think this is proof that the door is already open in the U.S. for not only raw milk in WI but every other place. I think this is an incredible opportunity to fulfill the needs of the market place. The interest is there and it's an incredible opportunity. What we need to focus on is taste and differentiation that make these cheeses unique. We also need to be able to market the cheeses by educating consumers. The opportunity is here and we need to move forward on this.