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BROVETTO DAIRY FARM... AND "CHEESE HOUSE"

One Family's Dream Come True

by Janet L. Aldrich,
Community Educator,
Cornell Cooperative Extension of
Delaware County

What used to be commonplace is now considered complicated and on-farm cheese houses in New York State have entered the realms of nostalgia. That is part of the draw to the Brovetto Dairy Farm in Harpersfield, New York. Ronald and Corinne Brovetto and their son Russell are milking cows and making cheese from their own steady supply of milk, for sale to consumers. Their thirty years of experience in dairy farming provided them with the main ingredient for cheese and the main ingredients it takes to make such a farm enterprise work - the ability to work long hours, pay close attention to detail, build what needs to be built and fix what needs to be fixed. This was not an idea - it was a dream from day one for Ronald Brovetto - and it took an entire family, their faith in God and each other, their friends and their neighbors, to make it a reality.

The Brovetto's make a speciality cheese called Tilsiter. Says Corinne, "It was named after the town of Tilsit in Germany where Napoleon lived. It is the third most popular cheese in Germany

today. You don't take all the whey out of this cheese, only about 60-70%, so it makes a nice firm but soft cheese that melts well and is great for cooking." It is a cheese that Ron knew growing up and so he knew what cheese he wanted to make. "They say it is one of the hardest ones to make, but, well, thirty years ago we didn't know how to milk a cow when we moved up from Long Island either," says Corinne with a smile.

Both Ron and Corinne also work off the farm - she as a nurse, he as an engineer. They raised four children and ran a 50-cow dairy farm on 300 acres in Harpersfield. Now their son Russell is the farmer manager and Ron and Corinne still do the milking. In October of 1999, with their family's full support, after researching their product and taking a couple of cheese making courses, they began by developing a business plan. They received much advice and help from their local bank, The American Cheese Society, International Machinery (Wisconsin equipment supplier), and specialists from the Department of Agriculture and Markets.

"We estimated about \$60,000 to get started, but it ran into more like \$80,000," said Corinne. "Ron designed the facility and we started pouring concrete in the spring. The kids were all in on it and we had a lot of help from our friends and neighbors. We worked all summer and the following spring the kids laid the waterlines. We got the equipment late last summer and set it all up ourselves. We made the first batch of cheese the day after Thanksgiving last year and a couple of batches in December. Then we had that snowy winter and just had to keep the farm going so we didn't start again until the end of February. That's when we got to taste our first batches. We knew we liked

it but didn't know if any one else would. So we brought our cheese to church functions and I brought it to the nursing home for the staff to sample. They love it."

More On Marketing

The Brovetto's had to wait for the March batches to age and then brought some to the Andes Farmers' Market where people tried it and liked (including a well known t.v. celebrity). Then it went over well at Pakatakan Farmers' Market in Margarettsville. Named after their hometown, Harpersfield Cheese is also being sold through three local "farm stores" - Harpersfield General Store, the Lucky Dog Farm Store in Hamden, and the Cooperstown Cheese Company in Milford. People are delighted with the full flavor of this robust cheese. Corinne is not so sure

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The Part-Time Farmer

Albany County
P.O. Box 497
Martin Rd.
Voorheesville, NY 12186
(518) 765-3500

Columbia County
Extension Center
479 Route 66
Hudson, NY 12534
(518) 828-3346

Delaware County
P.O. Box 184
NYS Route 10
Hamden, NY 13782-0184
(607) 865-6531

Greene County
HCR 3, Box 906
Cairo, New York 12413
(518) 622-9820

Rensselaer County
Old County Health Building
61 State Street
Troy, New York 12180
(518) 272-4210

Saratoga County
50 West High Street
Ballston Spa, NY 12020
(518) 885-8995

Schenectady County
107 Nott Terrace, Suite 301
Schenectady, NY 12305
(518) 372-1622

Schoharie County
41 South Grand St.
Cobleskill, NY 12043
(518) 234-4303
(518) 296-8310

Washington County
County Office Bldg. Annex
Lower Main Street
Hudson Falls, New York
(518) 746-2560

not so sure about the strong flavored rind, but many customers are wild about it. So this cheese offers the best of both worlds in taste - a highly piquant rind with an ivory white to yellow firm cheese, slightly sour in flavor. Said Ron, "If you make the same cheese that Kraft makes, there is no purpose in making it." This speciality cheese is a favorite at these markets and people visit the Brovetto Dairy Farm and Cheese House just to see the operation. "When people come in here, some actually get tears in their eyes because it reminds them of home."

Future marketing plans include a Farm & Cheese House Website where people will be welcomed to a 'virtual' tour.

The Process

The first step in cheese making is good sanitation. Wednesday is cheese making day on the Brovetto farm and the night before they sanitize all the equipment in the processing room. Before any of them enter the area, they shower, put on clean clothing, and don protective white jackets in order to avoid contamination. Visitors also wear the jackets and plastic booties.

Close to 3,000 pounds of milk - some from Tuesday night's milking, some from Wednesday morning's - is moved from the barn via a portable bulk tank on wheels to a room attached but separate from the processing area. From there it is pumped into a stainless steel vat in the processing room that was designed with a double jacket so that the milk could be pasteurized and cooled in the same tank.

Pasteurization is accomplished by bringing the milk up to a temperature of 145 degrees and maintaining that temperature for 30 minutes. Steam is blown over the top foam to pasteurize it to a temperature of about 150 degrees. There is a device that monitors the temperature, providing a paper graph giving temperature readings throughout the whole process. This helps Ron achieve proper temperatures for the recipe and provides government inspectors with proof of compliance.

Next the milk is cooled down to 90 degrees which is accomplished by running cold water through the double jacket of the vat. This takes about 30 minutes. Automatic paddles stir the milk and curd throughout the whole process. Corrine noted that three separate septic systems had to be installed for this operation, each with its own absorptic field.

Once the 90 degree temperature is reached, the culture is added. The culture serves to acidify the milk and later the curd. It begins with a pH of about 6.7 and you work to attain a pH of 5. The culture the Brovetto's use also helps create the unique flavor of Tilsiter.

After the culture has had some time to work, the rennet is prepared according to the recipe and added. Rennet makes the milk coagulate and turn into curd. This takes approximately 30-40 minutes and Ron maintains a steadfast watch of the process so that he can cut the curd before it gets too thick. Curd is cut with two "harps" - large stainless steel devices - one with vertical grids and one with horizontal grids that are drawn through the mixture one at a time. This results in hundreds of tiny rectangular pieces of curd that are easier to handle when it is time to pack the curd into stainless "hoops" - forms that shape the wheels of cheese.

The curds are floating in whey - the sweet liquid part of milk that is left over after the curd is removed. Again, with Tilsiter cheese, only 60-70% of the whey is removed so that you get a softer and more moist cheese than some other hard cheeses. "Wheying off" is accomplished by scalding the curd to a temperature of 100 degrees. The curd is continually stirred and the pH should get down to 6.2-6.15. This draws the whey off without killing the culture.

Then the curd is scooped out of the vat and pressed into the hoops. These are placed on a draining table where more whey can drain off. The final pH of 5 provides the perfect environment for the culture to work.

The curd is then turned from the hoops into a brine tank where they can take salt. The wheels float, so they need to be turned over and salted several times a day for two days. The brine is made up of vinegar, salt and calcium.

The wheels are then packed in cheesecloth and allowed to drain - the cheesecloth is then removed and they are placed into the "cave". The first section to be built in this enterprise, the cave is an underground structure formed with thick slabs of concrete where the Brovetto's try to maintain a temperature of about 55 degrees - no higher than that. The cave maintains 100% humidity and the cheese begins to age. Ideally it should age up to 18 months, but it is highly marketable at four and the Brovetto's customers are making it

tough for them to keep a supply on hand long enough to attain the ideal six months. Said Corinne. "At the Farmers' Markets people are saying to me they cannot wait for six months, they want it now! We have sold out about 150 lbs every week and are now making 250-280 lbs a week. If it increases anymore we will then be hiring help. This is one of our goals. But for right now we can only find the time to make our cheese one day a week". As the cheese wheels age, they develop a rind that gets moldy. Corinne must wash each wheel once a week, wiping them with a salt solution. As they get more aged and dryer the mold develops less. But the young wheels start to mold immediately. At the market Corinne tends to want to cut the rind off, but most customers stop her - it's their favorite part.

A Tasting

After hours of watching this process and seeing this beautiful cheese stacked high in the cave, I finally got to the best part - a tasting. No crackers, no breads - I got to taste the famous Harpersfield Cheese, pure and simple. Since I have always loved sharp New York cheddar, I love a full robust cheese. This cheese was unlike anything I had ever tasted and it was wonderful. I understood then the stories of customers clamoring for more at the markets, and nostalgic tears in the eyes of older customers.

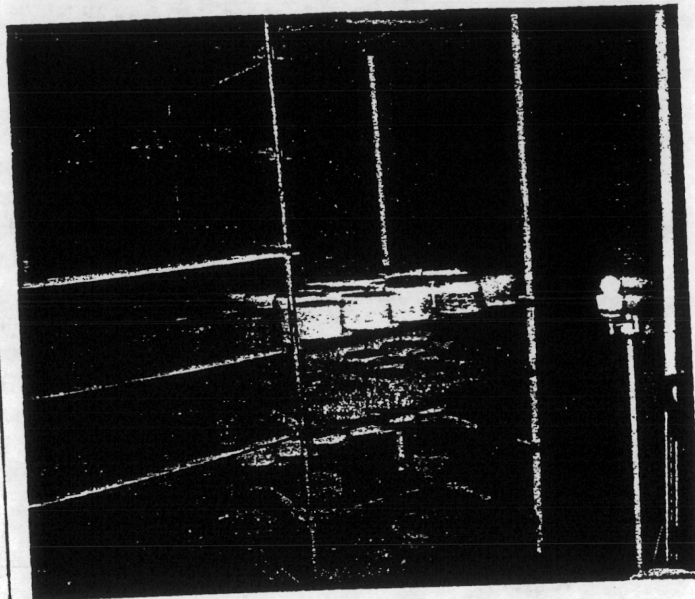
Now, it's not *all* hard work. The Brovetto's do have fun making their cheese. They hover over it, take copious notes and it is all very scientific, but they do have fun. For instance, there is the "dill batch". Corinne experimented. She only added the dill to one tiny section of the curd, so the experiment was confined to one wheel. When I noticed that the recipe cited caraway as a possible ingredient she looked intrigued... As for future cheeses, they are considering making a brie. How's Brovetto Brie sound!

Goals

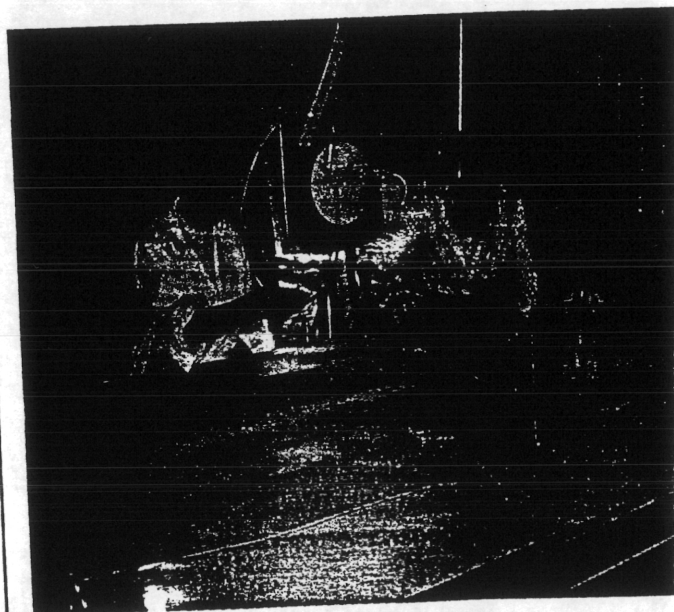
The Brovetto's have accomplished several of their goals in the past three years. They have built their cheese house. They've made and marketed their cheese. They are happy with their product and hope to expand production so that they use more than the current 20% of the milk the farm produces. In doing so, they hope they can provide work for people in the community and a way of farming that gives their own family a good life. They also hope to be able to retire from their off farm jobs and enjoy a little more free time themselves.

Farmer-to-Farmer

Ron and Corinne Brovetto are being visited by diverse groups hoping to learn what it takes to make speciality cheese. They are willing to offer advice to other farmers interested in starting a similar farm enterprise. Why? They feel this enterprise offers dairy farmers a real opportunity to make a greater profit from their own milk. They can be reached at their home in Harpersfield, New York, 607-278-6622 or by writing to: Box 216, Harpersfield, NY, 13786. Just don't "call" on Wednesdays - they're a little busy.



Cheese wheels are left to age in "The Cave" which maintains 100% humidity.



Ron hands the "harp" over to Corinne, as they draw it through and cut the curd into small pieces.