

OVER THE MOON

MOONSTRUCK CHEESES

By Janet Wallace

At the first World Jersey Cheese Festival, two Canadian cheeses won medals: the Ash Ripened Camembert and Baby Blue, both made by Moonstruck Organic Cheese.

For anyone who has tasted one of Moonstruck's cheeses, the awards come as no surprise. For a decade, Julia and Susan Grace have been making amazing cheeses from their small flock of Jersey cows.

"This all started years ago when Susan brought a cow home," says Julia Grace. At the time, they were organic market gardeners with a thirty-acre farm nestled into West Coast rainforest on Salt Spring Island, B.C.

After the first cow arrived, Julia soon realized that she had a talent for making cheese, and Susan discovered her love of working with cows. Julia started making a cheese called White Grace, which began as a cross between a Wensleydale and a Stilton. After hearing their friends and neighbours rave about their home-made cheese, the Graces started to switch the focus from market gardening to having a dairy.

Now Julia makes the cheese and Susan, the farm manager, milks and takes care of their herd of 25 Jersey cows. They milk between twelve to twenty cows at a time.

In 1998, the couple received a license to produce milk. At the time, the artisanal food movement was just taking off along the West Coast.

Julia and Susan had planned to market their cheese to health food stores because it was organic. "But soon," Susan says, "we realized that if we made a finer cheese, we could tap into a higher market."

This way, they could bring in as much income but with fewer cows.

To satisfy the premium market, they started to make more blue and Camembert-style cheeses. "Jersey milk makes a great blue cheese," says Julia, "the creaminess of the milk offsets the tanginess of the blue. There are hundreds of different cheeses. You need to put together a type that suits you as a cheesemaker and suits the type of milk you are using."

The Jersey milk has very large fat globules, which can provide a "great taste and mouth feel," explains Julia. To

avoid disturbing these globules, they use as little mechanical agitation as possible. Rather than pressing the cheese, they simply drain off the whey. The flavour develops by slow draining, and the curd texture and fat remain intact.

This distinctive method is one of the reasons that Moonstruck Organic Cheese stands out from the crowd, but the technique arose from necessity. When Julia first started to make cheese, they couldn't af-



Susan (left) is Moonstruck's farm manager and Julia (right) is the cheese-maker.



The milk producers at Moonstruck.

ford a cheese press, so she simply drained the cheese or pressed it with a bucket of water.

Now, Moonstruck produces ten types of cheese including several blues, Camembert-types and hard aged cheeses. Making these types of cheese is, according to Julia, “very labour-intensive. In particular, the blues and the Camemberts take a lot of babying.”

Part of the time involved is in fine-tuning the cheese. As the diet of the cows changes over the seasons, so does the flavour and composition of the milk. “Spring milk,” Julia says, “is best for long-aged cheeses. Winter milk is heavy with both protein and butterfat producing wonderful creamy cheeses that should be eaten early.” Raw milk is used in all of the aged cheeses; pasteurized milk is used for the others, such as the Camembert-like cheeses.

Susan says that many of their customers don’t care that the cheese is organic (formerly certified by the Islands Organic Producers Association, now certified by the B.C. Association for Regen-

erative Agriculture). Most of their customers, says Julia, “just want to make sure that the animals are happy and out on grass. The chefs just want it because it’s a high quality cheese.”

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a labour of love—
with a lot of love and
a lot of labour.**

Moonstruck Organic Cheese is now a thriving business. Two full-time and two part-time workers help make, sell and pack the cheese. Three to five part-time employees work with the cows. The Graces keep the “cheese-side completely separate from the cow-side with different employees for each.”

On average, a Moonstruck cow gives five gallons (25 litres) of milk a day over a 300-day lactation. Each cow is given a total of ten pounds (4.5 kg) of grain a day,

split between two milkings. The animals rarely have health problems, but it wasn’t always like this. “At the beginning,” says Susan, “we had to do a lot of health care.” Over the years, the couple learned how to treat and prevent problems organically. One of the learning tools was the ODairy email group; they often went to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ODairy> with questions or to hear a second opinion.

“The animals were a steep learning curve,” says Julia. “Things can go wrong quickly.”

To prevent mastitis and other health problems, the barns and paddock are kept clean and dry, not an easy task in the rainy West Coast winters. “We break our backs in the winter trying to keep things dry,” says Susan, adding that they put “mounds of woodchips on the pathways and in the paddock.” The work has paid off. They have no problems with worms or hoof rot, and hardly any mastitis.

Each week, the milk undergoes the CMT (California Mastitis Test). If any quarter of the udder shows “something suspicious,” Susan applies a cream for a few days. The cream contains the essential oils of tea tree, mint and other plants. She also uses a tincture of cleavers to “flush the udder” and prevent edema and mastitis. A homeopathic cream is also used to treat edema.

Wood sage, also called germander (*Teucrium chamaedrys*), is used as an antibacterial agent, and tea tree oil is used as an anti-fungal compound. Swedish bitters are used to treat ketosis, and holistic clay is given to calves with scours (diarrhea). The cows always have free access to kelp mixed with salt and minerals.



Moonstruck's cheese-making facility.

Much care is taken to prevent health problems around calving time, and there is always a supply of colostrum in the freezer. Heifers with edema are “pre-milked,” sometimes as long as two weeks before calving. Julia says, “This gets the blood circulating around the udder, which helps to reduce the swelling and reduce the chance of mastitis.”

To prevent milk fever, older cows receive a calcium drench at calving time. Susan has learned to spot the early signs of milk fever, such as cold ears right after calving or a cow trying to drink the colostrum after it is milked out.

Calving begins in February. The calves are fed from a nipple bucket as soon as possible. “If they have ever sucked from the mom,” says Susan, “it’s just hell to break the habit and that only lengthens the time before they can be integrated into the herd.”

The calves are housed in a group pen near their mothers so that they can be licked and nuzzled, but cannot nurse. This helps reduce the stress for the mothers.

The calves have a small pasture where they can run and play during the day. They are leash-walked to and from the paddock; a practice that helps with halter training. The calves are weaned when they are two months old.

Another preventative health measure is keeping a closed herd. No new animals are brought onto the farm, and breeding is done through artificial insemination. All cows are bred to Jersey semen. Moonstruck needs only one to two replacement cows each year. If there are more heifers than needed, they are sold for family cows.

Moonstruck generates nutrient-rich resources in the form of whey and manure. “Back when we had the market garden, we always looked for compost,” says Julia. “And now we have more manure than we can shake a stick at.”

Most of the manure is composted in covered piles for about six months and then spread on the pasture in the spring and fall. Lime is added at the same time. A portion of whey is applied to fields as well but Julia and Susan find that

it is difficult to work with. They hope they can find pig farmers to pick up much of the whey.

The main grazing season is from March to the end of July. “By August,” says Susan, “the pastures are burnt by drought; even though the cows are on pasture, they are not grazing much. If it rains in September, the cows are kept off the pasture so the grass can return. It can come back with an amazingly small amount of moisture, and then it will provide another round of good grazing.”

Julia and Susan have experimented with different types of pasture rotation. Now they rotate the pastures carefully, but tend to graze in much larger blocks than before. They found that “there was too much pushing and shoving with the smaller pasture blocks. How often the cows are moved is guided by the season, and the bulk of the grass,” says Julia.

Their hay comes from organic farms on Salt Spring and Vancouver Island. Some is grown by a neighbouring farmer who applies the composted cow manure to his hayfields, and sells hay to the Graces in return.

“It’s nice to be building these kinds of relationships,” Julia continues. She grew up in farm country in Nova Scotia and recalls farmers helping each other. For her, farming relies upon arrangements that work for everyone.

Even though it seems that Susan and Julia have mastered the skills of cheese-making and raising cows organically, the learning continues. But, as Susan says, “Learning curves are expensive. It takes a long time to pay back.” Over the last few years, they have focused on “becoming better business people.”

“It’s an expensive business to run and it’s really hard to make money,” says Susan. “It’s like this for anyone involved in food production—the margins are skinny.”

The Graces are trying to “smooth out the income curve” so that there is more money coming in during the winter.

Moonstruck dairy is a labour of love—with a lot of love and a lot of labour. The Graces are trying to find ways to do less of the physical work. “We’re learning how to teach and manage,” says Susan. “This will make it sustainable.”

Moonstruck Organic Cheese is already sustainable in so many ways. The cows are raised organically and the fine cheese rarely travels beyond the Lower Mainland of B.C. (Although it is possible to order gift boxes by mail.)

On the Moonstruck website, Julia and Susan write, “We treat our cows well because they are the foundation of our company.” I believe that this is their business-side talking. I think that the Graces are excellent stewards—of their land and the cows—and this is why their cows are so well treated.

“The healthier and happier they are, the more sweet and fragrant their milk is,” continues the text on the website. The delicious taste and fabulous texture

of the cheese does reflect the state of the cows, but also the shared passions of Julia and Susan Grace for raising cows and making cheese.

Janet Wallace is a lover of cheese and the editor of The Canadian Organic Grower.

For more information on Moonstruck Organic Cheese, or to order a shipment, visit www.moonstruckcheese.com.

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