



Three Entrepreneurs Open Artisan Creamery In WA Seaside Town, Develop Line Of Soft-Ripened Cheeses For Pacific Northwest Market

Farmers' market shoppers from Port Townsend to Seattle were treated to a new line of soft-ripened cheese this summer from Washington state's newest artisan cheese company, Mt. Townsend Creamery.

Mt. Townsend is the collaborative effort of three young men from various backgrounds: Matt Day, owner/monger; Ryan Trail, owner/productioner; and Will O'Donnell, owner/agitator. All are from the Port Townsend area.

Trail previously worked for the New Belgium Brewery Company in Fort Collins, CO, providing him with experience in plant design and machinery. Day's expertise lies in marketing and finance.

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—Ryan Trail,
Mt. Townsend Creamery

O'Donnell came from an agricultural background. About four years ago, he began investigating the creation of a farmstead cheesemaking operation with a local farm. After a series of difficulties obtaining the necessary permits, the project was abandoned.

Day and Trail were introduced to O'Donnell at a cheesemaking short course through Washington State University. Coincidentally, all three men lived a short distance from one another; O'Donnell and Trail even shared the same childbirth class.

The trio's goal was to "make really good cheese, while providing a viable market for the remaining local dairies," Day said.

The first step was to sign a long-term lease on a building – a challenging pursuit in an area where real estate is at a premium, with few appropriately zoned facilities.

The men started from scratch with four cinderblock walls, doing all renovations themselves. The biggest issue was how to handle wastewater, Trail said.

"When city officials hear the word 'wastewater,' they throw up their hands," he said.

It took just under a year before reaching a final operating agreement with the city, under which roughly

85 percent of the whey is separated off-site for livestock feeding. A buffer tank accepts the remainder, and pH levels are continually adjusted before it goes back into the city. As a contingent, two water samples must be collected monthly for the first year.

Renovations were mostly complete by last February. To achieve a sloping floor, the group cut trenches in the concrete form, and purchased a combination of new and used equipment, including new CIP pumps, COP tanks and a 300-gallon vat pasteurizer, along with used molds, sinks, press and chiller.

The creamery uses a 350-gallon stainless steel tote to haul milk three times a week to and from the two local dairies which supply the milk.

"That way, there's no risk of getting any other herd's milk," Day said, adding that Mt. Townsend is committed to using milk from farmers who use no synthetic growth hormones and pasture their cows as much as possible.

The trio began making test batches of cheese in January 2006. Cheese was ready for sale three months later, after much experimentation and a few dry runs.

"We've done everything wrong you could hope to do wrong during the make process," Day said. "We forgot the rennet, we over-salted...we ended up throwing away a lot of cheese."

Perhaps the biggest mistake was enthusiastically attempting to make three different styles of cheese at a time, he added.

In the end, our grand plan was to keep it simple; it wasn't going to work any other way, Day continued.

The decision to make soft-ripened cheese evolved from the trio's personal taste. We wanted to make cheeses we liked, Trail said.

We're also paying a premium for the milk we use, so we wanted to make cheese with as much added value as possible, he continued.

"And we did a fair amount of market research," Trail said. "When we talked to wholesalers and retailers, they said 'Whatever you do, don't make another Gouda.'"

There are a number of cheese makers around here making Gouda-style cheese, but no one was making a soft-ripened cheese, Trail said.

Cheese made by Mt. Townsend Creamery is similar in style to some traditional French cheeses. It currently manufactures three varieties –

Trailhead, Cirrus and Seastack.

Trailhead falls somewhere between Comte and Cantal – a mild cheese with mellow flavor that changes with seasonal grazing. The creamery is planning to make two versions of Trailhead – one aged for about one month and another aged three to six months.

Cirrus is the creamery's take on Camembert, only smaller, creamier and with less bite than the traditional Norman version. It is aged two to three weeks before sale.

"A lot of people really love this cheese," Day said. "It's not too difficult of a flavor to enjoy."

Named after the rock formations dotting the North Pacific coast, Seastack is ripened with an ashen coating and dusted with sea salt. Loosely based on French Chaource, this soft-ripened cheese requires gentle pasteurization and minimal handling.

Of Seastack, "people absolutely love it or are turned off by it," Day said. "I think it's our best cheese."

Mt. Townsend sells the bulk of its cheese through farmers' markets, including three Seattle markets and the popular Port Townsend market.

"We've had unbelievable support from the local community," Day said. "People come out in droves."

As cold weather approaches and the season begins to die down, Trail said the creamery will start making a push for wholesale accounts – Whole Foods Market in Seattle is already slated to carry the cheese. Still new to the industry, he anticipates the next three months "should be interesting."

The creamery's cheese has also been picked up by several prominent Seattle restaurants, and plans are in motion to institute an online store before the holidays.

In addition to O'Donnell, Day and Trail, Mt. Townsend employs two other workers to help with production and three employees to handle packaging and labeling.

There's a community starting to develop among Pacific Northwest cheese makers, Day said, adding that cheese makers like Rod Volbeda of Willamette Valley Cheese Co. in Salem, OR, and Kurt Dammeier of Beecher's Handmade Cheese in Seattle were exceptionally helpful and willing to share thoughts and ideas.

"There aren't a lot of small cheese makers in Washington right now,

but the numbers are growing," Day said. "We can all collaborate and promote what we're doing – everyone benefits from that."

Looking back over the past 12 months, there are certain conditions that are critical in order for a small cheesemaking operation to succeed, the group agreed.

"The first thing is product quality. If that's not there, you can lose customers pretty quickly," Trail said, recalling his years in the craft brewing industry when microbreweries erupted and "quality went down the tank."

It's also important to run your operation as efficiently as possible, using less materials and easing labor efforts, Trail said. And it helps to be financially savvy.

"You need to make great cheese, but you also need to pay yourself at the end of the day," he said.

We're young families who live in a rural community where there's not a lot of industry, Trail said. Here, you need to make something work for yourself.

Our aim is eventually becoming a strong regional player in the Pacific Northwest, Trail said, and our appeal is being a "local" cheese.

"We don't want to send cheese to the East Coast. We don't want to send cheese any farther than it has to go," he said. Quality and environmental issues become a factor in shipping cheese a long way, he said.

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In four or five years, the partners would like to have their own custom-tailored manufacturing facility – a destination where visitors can witness cheesemaking through glassed-in walls and are taught the process from start to finish.

The creamery is in early discussions about the possibility of a joint development that would include several local businesses doing food processing in a common location, Trail said.

For more details on Mt. Townsend Creamery, call (360) 379-0895 or visit mttownsendcreamery.com. •