



## Vermont's Thistle Hill Farm Models Award-Winning Tarentaise After Alpine Cheeses; Was 'Love At First Sight'

An original, Vermont-made farmstead cheese fashioned after European Alpine styles is quickly gathering awards and praise since its initial manufacture less than five years ago.

Thistle Hill Farm Tarentaise is a raw milk Alpine cheese made in limited, seasonal production by Thistle Hill Farm of North Pomfret, VT, about 15 miles north of Woodstock.

The farm is owned and operated by John and Janine Putnam. Other than the summer help provided by their four children and incidental work by temporary employees, the Putnams handle all milking and cheesemaking responsibilities themselves.

**"I'm not saying Vermont is exactly like the Alps, but...you need to try and replicate the climate as best you can."**

—John Putnam

The long progression to creating a marketable, artisan cheese began in March 1986 when the Putnams purchased the North Pomfret farm in a state of "serious disrepair," having been neglected for almost two decades.

They initially kept beef cows to bring the pastures back, which had laid fallow for 20 years. However, this was "too much in a direction we didn't want to go," Putnam said, so the couple dedicated four years to constructing a dairy barn – doing the majority of the work themselves.

"That's what we did on nights and weekends," Putnam said.

With a closed herd of 20 Jersey cows, they began producing certified organic milk in 1995, which they shipped to Organic Cow of Vermont. Still, the couple investigated other possibilities for increased revenue.

"Even if you're organic, it's hard to support a family," Putnam said.

They examined the idea of bottling organic milk, which was too mechanically intense, Putnam said. Instead, they decided on farmstead cheesemaking.

The family made three trips to the Alpine regions of Switzerland, France and Italy. Despite the occasional language barrier, their European hosts were helpful and welcoming and they returned to Vermont with plans for a cheesemaking operation strongly resembling a traditional European design.

The farm's outbuildings were constructed in close proximity to each other to replicate the European "whole farm" ideal. The milking parlor is about 60 feet from the house, and the cheese plant is 50 feet from the milking parlor, Putnam said.

Thistle Hill Farm Tarentaise is made in a newly-constructed, 28-foot by 48-foot cheese house, with make and aging rooms downstairs and an office above. It was designed to be upwind from the dairy barn to eliminate any chance of the barn's odors affecting the fresh cheese.

The cheese is made using a copper cheese vat – one of only a handful in the US and custom-made in Switzerland – in the tradition of the Tarentaise Valley in the Savoie region of the French Alps.

The cheese is made using French cultures and homemade rennet with whey collected from the previous cheesemaking. Curds are cut by hand with a harp, stirred and cooked, then transported from the copper vat to the French forepress using a large cheese cloth.

The cheese then goes through a series of imported French molds and turnings before entering the aging room. The Tarentaise molds create a cheese roughly 4 inches high by 14 inches in diameter with concave sides unique to Beaufort, Abondance and Tarentaise cheeses.

While Putnam successfully purchased used machinery for the milk house and dairy barn, finding used European cheese equipment in the US was nearly impossible.

"Over there, it's as easy as buying a used car," he said.

After the facility was constructed and equipment installed, the Putnams began making cheese on July 5, 2002. The entire first batch was eaten or sold immediately.

"Remember – this is four years in the making," Putnam said. "We had really competent help and hit the ground running."

Just before setting off to Europe, Putnam said he phoned Steve Jenkins and relayed his plans. Jenkins cautioned that of all the people who say they're going to make cheese, only 99 percent actually don't.

After making that first successful batch of cheese, Putnam called Jenkins again, who replied "Send me some." A short time later Jenkins' Fairway Market in New York was selling Thistle Hill Farm Tarentaise.

Due to a limited number of cows and weather constraints, Thistle Hill Farm makes cheese from about late April through November.

The farm's closed herd of certified organic Jersey cows are exclusively fed certified organic hay produced on-site and organic grain. During the summer months, the cows are rotated through a series of small pastures to ensure they graze on fresh grass every 12 hours.

The barn utilizes comfort tie stalls where the cows are milked twice daily. The warm, butterscotch color of Tarentaise is testament to the high beta carotene, vitamin E, conjugated linoleic acid and omega 3 fatty acids found in the milk of grass-fed cows, according to Putnam.

Putnam also noted similarities between the terroir of Vermont and the Alpine region.

"I'm not saying Vermont is exactly like the Alps, but they're both cool, hilly climates," Putnam said. "It's an important component – you need to try and replicate the climate as best you can."

Thistle Hill ages its cheese in a 20-foot by 20-foot affinage room for at least four months, with optimal aging at between five and six months. During the aging process, cheeses are scrubbed twice each week to develop a natural rind and butterscotch color.

Cheeses can also be aged for up to a year by specific customer demand, Putnam said.

"There's a tremendous variation from when it's made and how long it's aged," he continued.

Despite no real marketing plan, Thistle Hill Farm Tarentaise was an immediate success at the retail level. Putnam started out small, traveling to local Vermont specialty stores, all of which purchased the cheese.

He then expanded to New York and Boston, securing deals with high-end restaurants like Artisanal and established retailers such as Murray's Cheese Shop.

The cheese is now available at

specialty stores and restaurants throughout the eastern US and in select cities including Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and Chicago.

While Thistle Hill Farm was growing its customer base, it was also collecting awards. Tarentaise won first place in the Farmstead Cheese category of the 2006 American Cheese Society Cheese Contest, and third place in the Smear Ripened Category of the 2003 US Championship Cheese Contest.

A result of this acclaim is that demand is outpacing production "by a mile," Putnam said. This year, the entire batch of Tarentaise was sold out by the end of summer.

In order to keep pace with demand, an expansion plan is currently in the works.

"We're topographically challenged," Putnam said. "Our land can't support any more cows."

The plan is to unite with another local farm and form a partnership. A second cheese plant would be constructed at the nearby farm and Tarentaise would be made by Putnam using milk from the partner's herd.

"It would be my process, using my recipe, and would share the fundamental characteristics with a slightly different flavor, resulting from the terroir of that nearby farm," Putnam said. "It would add another welcome element of complexity."

Design for expansion is in the initial stages and could start over the next few years, he said.

Putnam said he has no reservations about selecting Tarentaise as the farm's signature – and only – cheese, despite its seasonality and need for intense supervision.

"I fell in love with it at first sight," he said. "I thought, if we could make this cheese, we'd be very proud."

For more information, call Thistle Hill Farm, at ((802) 457-9349 or visit [www.thistlehillfarm.com](http://www.thistlehillfarm.com). •

