



Leelanau Cheese Marks 10-Year Anniversary; Strives To Keep Up With Demand For Award Winning Raclette

The genesis of an award-winning Michigan artisan cheese company can be traced back to small mountain dairy farms high in the Swiss Alps.

Known for its signature Aged Raclette that took First Runner-Up in the 2005 United States Championship Cheese Contest, the Leelanau Cheese Company of Suttons Bay, MI, has enjoyed mounting success since it first began making cheese a decade ago.

Detroit native and co-owner John Hoyt embarked on his career as a cheese maker while working at a vineyard in the Valais region of Switzerland, where he savored his first taste of Raclette. It is believed that Raclette began on the hillsides of Valais as the wine harvest was coming to an end.

Grape gatherers took from their sacks a small loaf of brown bread, some cheese and a bottle of wine. Legend has it that one of the men stabbed a piece of cheese with a large buck knife and as he approached a crackling fire, the cheese started to melt.

"Raclette" is derived from the French word "racler" which means "to scrape."

Traditional Raclette was made by slicing a wheel of cheese in half and placing it close to an open fire. When it started to bubble and drip, the cheese was scraped off and used

as a spread over potatoes, pickled onions and gherkins, served with dry white wine.

"I thought to myself, 'Oh my God. Why don't we have this in America,'" Hoyt said.

Immediately intrigued, Hoyt enrolled in a cheesemaking program at Switzerland's Chateaneuf School of Agriculture. He spent the next few years apprenticing at small dairy farms in the Alps called alpages. After a four-month apprenticeship at Mondreleche alpage, Hoyt carried on as a cheese maker at Eison, where he met his future wife, Anne.

Together, they worked as cheese makers for several other co-ops, including Thyon and Vaysonnaz.

The couple returned to Michigan in 1989 and started planning their own cheese business but had little luck finding investors. Circumstance changed, however, when Hoyt discovered an old 1957 Damrow vat pasteurizer initially used to brew beer. He bought the ancient machine for \$100.

"That was the one push to help us get going," he said.

Working closely with the Michigan Department of Agriculture, the Hoyts made their first batch of cheese six years later at a rented space in Omena, MI, in March of 1995, and opened for business that summer when their Raclette had been properly aged for three months.

Foodies Flock To Black Star Farms

Leelanau Cheese leases its 1,200-square-foot facility from Black Star Farms in Suttons Bay, MI. Located in the heart of the Leelanau Peninsula Vintners Wine Trail, the farm attracts thousands of wine and cheese disciples every year.

The 160-acre country estate features premium vinifera wines and fruit brandies, all-season bed and breakfast inn, championship equestrian facility, and recreational trails.

The creamery is part of Black Star Farms' on-site wine tasting room where visitors can watch the cheese makers at work. Thousands of visitors pass through

the tasting room each week, Hoyt said.

There's a natural link between cheese and wine, Hoyt said, adding that Black Star Farms' owners, Don and Mary Lou Coe, are definitely "food and wine people."

Leelanau Cheese processes roughly 2,400 pounds of milk for Raclette every other day and about 800 pounds of milk for its French Style Fromage Blanc/Leelanau Cheese Spread twice weekly.

The company's signature Raclette is available in full wheels, half-wheels and by the pound, including Green Peppercorn and Aged varieties. Its Leelanau Cheese Spread comes in plain, dill, garlic and peppercorn flavors.

Its milk supply comes from the Garvin Farm in Cedar, MI, centered in the Leelanau Peninsula. A licensed bulk milk hauler, Hoyt picks up the milk each morning in his truck called "the Milky Way" and delivers it to the creamery at Black Star Farms.

From June through Christmas, the tasting room sees a throng of visitors, Hoyt said, mostly tourists and secondary vacation home residents. The company

generates the bulk of its sales through its retail outlet – including on-site transactions and nationwide shipping.

Leelanau also sells its cheese to groceries and restaurants throughout Michigan. Demand for the cheese is so strong, however, that the company is having a hard time taking on new wholesale orders, Hoyt said.

Aged Raclette On Short Supply

Those looking to buy award-winning Aged Raclette from Leelanau Cheese may expect a bit of a wait.

"It's so hard to dedicate cheese for aged when we're selling out of the mild," Hoyt said.

Resting on wooden boards, it will take at least three months for the mild Raclette to ripen, eight to 10 months for sharp and two years for the extra sharp variety. The wheels are turned, washed and brushed with salt water every day by hand.

The company employs one full-time worker and one part-time employee. For its Fromage Blanc,

Hoyt is in charge of making the curd and his wife Anne does the draining and blending, making the cheese "a sellable product," he said.

Hoyt said he was surprised and pleased in placing second last March at the US Championship Cheese Contest, but always felt the company's Aged Raclette was a superior-tasting product.

Over the course of a decade, Leelanau's Raclette has won a Gold Medal in the 2005 World Cheese Awards, a Silver Medal in the 2004 World Cheese Awards, a Silver Medal in the 2004 American



Cheese Society Cheese Contest and a Bronze Medal in the 2003 ACS Contest, and earned Gold and Silver medals in the 2001 and 2005 US Championship Cheese Contests sponsored by the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA).

It has also been named Grand Champion Cheese of the Michigan State Fair in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2004.

Right now, Leelanau Cheese is comfortable with its size and production capacity.

"Expansion is a big project that takes a lot of consideration, as well as more bank loans and more employees," Hoyt said. "It's a giant step. We didn't even have an inventory before. Now we do."

For more information, contact Leelanau Cheese Company at (231) 271-2600 or visit www.blackstarfarms.com.

