

How One College Student Experienced The Ups & Downs Of Cheesemaking Internships

Madison—Students looking to secure internships in the cheese and dairy industry are up against stiff competition, bureaucratic hurdles and the challenge of finding a position to fit their needs and expectations.

Employers expect to increase internship hiring by about 7 percent this year, according to a recent survey from the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

However, demand for college-age talent spans all regions and most sectors, with the exception of food and beverage manufacturing, which is down 5.2 percent.

Francis Hamre is one of those students actively pursuing a career in the cheese and dairy industry.

Currently living in Wichita Falls, TX, he's a senior at Midwestern State University with a major in marketing, slated to graduate next December.

Hamre grew up on a farm, and has always been interested in the dairy industry.

"I never wanted to have a big, ridiculous dairy with a bunch of cows," he said. "Long story short, I got interested in goat dairies."

Hamre decided to pursue an internship in goat dairying, and contacted 20 different goat dairies across the US for possible openings, paid or unpaid.

In November 2009, Hamre visited a goat dairy in Ontario, Canada. He was awarded a six-month internship – the legal limit a US citizen can live in Canada.

"We had talked to three different government officials, and everything was looking good. But when I showed up at the border, I was turned away," Hamre said.

"This was in January," he said. "I'm a 21 year-old kid, trying to cross the border so I can go to the middle of nowhere and live at a goat dairy. I think the story was just so ridiculous, they wouldn't let me in."

Not knowing what else to do, Hamre drove through the night to stay with family in Watertown, SD, for about two weeks.

"I had put forth so much effort in finding an internship that I didn't want to give up yet," Hamre said.

With help from his university, he was able to land an internship at a West Coast goat dairy.

That, to put it mildly, did not go well.

"Pretty much right away, I noticed how horrible the place was," he said. "Those people had no business trying to run a farm, much less everything else they were doing – milking between 50 and 100 goats, making cheese and selling cheese. It was a really big operation."

The first three days of the internship were awful, Hamre recalled.

"At the time, I had more experience on a farm than both the owners combined because they had bought the farm out of nowhere on a whim," he said.

During his stay, Hamre kept a journal, recording all the goats that died under the company's care.

"In the three months I was there, it was an average of two goats a week that were dying," he said. "They had to go out and buy more goats just to keep production up."

I couldn't believe what I'd gotten myself into, Hamre said. I learned more in the three days I was in Canada than the entire three months I was out West.

Hamre did learn how to make



Francis Hamre (left) volunteered at the US Championship Cheese Contest last March in Green Bay, WI. While there, Hamre had the opportunity to have some of the country's leading cheese experts including Mark Johnson (right) and Tim Czmowski (center) evaluate the samples he brought along.

chevre, Feta and a hard goat's milk cheese, and enjoyed working the farmers' market circuit.

A week before his term was up, internal strife between members of the family-owned operation – which eventually necessitated a visit from the police – proved too much for Hamre to bare.

"They ended up giving me a bad review. Part of my grade was their review," Hamre said. His professor "didn't take it seriously. I was just glad to get out of there."

Since returning to Texas, Hamre has focused on making his own cheese with raw milk from a single cow, experimenting with different recipes.

"I do it the farmstead, artisanal way. I buy some cultures, but I also try to make my own. I want to learn the 'old school' way," he said. "Obviously if I ever get into higher production I'll have to do it differently, but this is the way I want to do it right now."

With A Little Help From Wisconsin

Through the mutual acquaintance of a food buyer in the St. Louis area,

Hamre first made contact with Stan Dietsche, sales and procurement manager for Oshkosh Cold Storage, Oshkosh, WI.

Dietsche invited Hamre to volunteer at the 2011 US Championship Cheese Contest last March in Green Bay, WI.

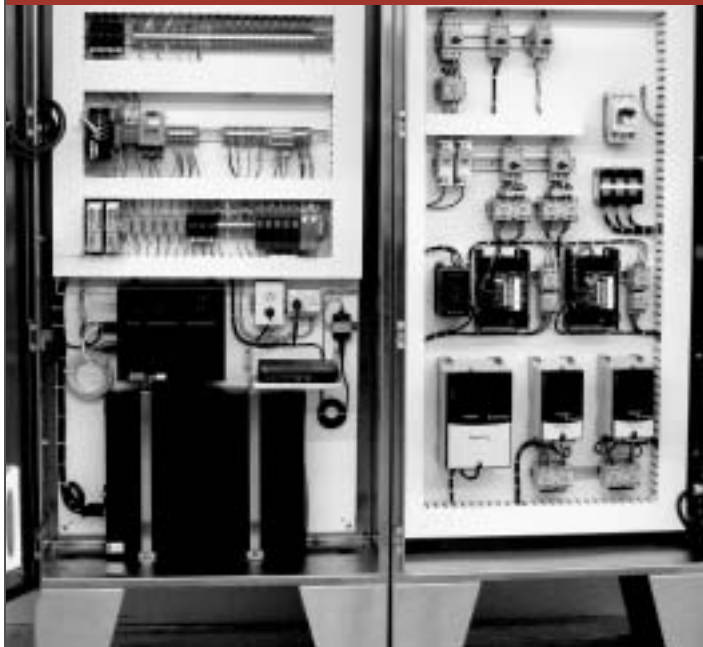
"I brought along some of my own cheese, which was really great because I had five or six cheese judges – the smartest cheese people in the world – tasting my cheese and giving me advice," Hamre said. "It was really a great opportunity, and I absolutely loved it."

While in Wisconsin, Hamre took a self-guided cheese tour of the state, stopping at Holland's Family Cheese in Thorp, Union Star Cheese in Fremont, and LaGrandier's Hillside Dairy, Inc. in Stanley.

"I actually got to make cheese one day with Gary Grossen (Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker at UW-Madison's Babcock Hall Dairy Plant). That was really great. Gary's a really smart guy, and he's got a lot to say," Hamre said.

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"I had so many people in Wisconsin, especially Stan, that bent backwards to help me," Hamre said.

Hamre returned to Texas feeling renewed and confident.

"I go back to school in December, so I want to do something this summer so by the time I graduate, I've got enough credibility to find a job," he said.

Hamre's long-term goal is to own an artisanal, farmstead cheese operation, and he said he's willing to move pretty much anywhere in pursuit of that goal.

Happy Ending With Harmony Dairy

Just recently, Hamre's long pursuit of the perfect cheese internship took a positive turn. This summer, he will officially be interning at Wisconsin's Harmony Specialty Dairy Foods.

"He's getting everything from the cheesemaking process to the conversion, all the way to the sales and marketing. He'll get a taste of all three."

—Ralph Bredl,

Harmony Specialty Dairy

Harmony-Ho Holsteins is a 450-cow registered Holstein dairy in Stratford, WI, owned by Ralph and Sharon Bredl, and daughter Martine. In May 2007, the Bredls established Harmony Speciality Dairy Foods, LLC, in nearby Edgar, WI. (see www.cheesereporter.com/CompanyProfiles/bredl.pdf)

Harmony produces British-style cheeses such as Abergele, Caerphilly Style, Ale Caerphilly, Cheshire Style and Double Gloucester Style varieties.

The company also offers LMPS Mozzarella, whole milk pizza cheese, Muenster, Monterey Jack with Jalapenos, and Kidwelly Castle - a British version of Parmesan.

Hamre met with Ralph Bredl through the Wisconsin Specialty Cheese Institute (WSCI) network via Stan Dietsche.

"Stan took it upon himself to find him a position," Bredl said. "He visited with us, one thing led to another, and it made sense for everybody."

Hamre arrived in Edgar for his paid internship this week, and will tentatively stay through early to mid-August.

"Our cheese plant is blessed with a nice little house," Bredl said. "Part of it's an office, and part of it's suitable for someone to live in. So, they're basically living in the cheese maker's house dating back to the forties and fifties," Bredl said.

Hamre will be responsible for a combination of things this summer, but his primary focus will be to learn

and be involved in the company's cheesemaking process.

"Hopefully, his skills will grow to the point where he's able to do vats by himself under the supervision of our licensed cheese makers," Bredl said.

Hamre will also be involved in cheese conversion and packaging, and will work two mornings a week at area farmers' markets.

"He's getting everything from the cheesemaking process to the conversion and packaging, all the way to the sales and marketing," Bredl said. "He'll get a taste of all three."

Since about 1990, the Harmony-Ho dairy farm has hosted roughly 40-plus students from around the world, primarily through the University of Minnesota.

"We phased out of that a few years ago for a variety of reasons, but then as we added the cheese plant four years ago, we found there was a bit of chemistry that was positive for everyone to go back into those situations," Bredl said.

As far as the challenges of taking on interns, Bredl said "the cheese plant is a clean deal. Housing is there, and everyone has their own transportation."

"We had a gentleman with us last year who completed the final hours of his cheese maker license at our facility, took his test in August and left with his license, so that was great for everyone," he said.

For the dairy farm, it got to be too complicated to take on interns, Bredl said.

"There's the business relationship, and there's 'Are you part of the family?'" Bredl said. "When we had foreign trainees or younger students, high school age, then you're bringing a family member in. That comes with entirely different demands - energy and time demands on the part of the host." r

First Graduates From College Of Marin's New Artisan Cheese Certificate Program

Novato, CA—An inaugural class of 11 students officially graduated recently from the new Artisan Cheese Certificate Program at the College of Marin here.

Another 12 students are expected to graduate from the fall program.

At an informal graduation ceremony, students received certificates signed by Maureen Cunnie, president of the California Artisan Cheese Guild and partner with Cowgirl Creamery in Point Reyes Station and Petaluma.

This is an exciting milestone for the popular and innovative new program, said College of Marin president David Wain Coon.

"We are very proud of all of the students who are the first to complete our Artisan Cheese Certificate Program," Coon said.

Sharon Jones is among the first group of students to complete the artisan cheese program launched last fall to meet a growing demand from cheese aficionados and industry professionals.

"People have thought that France is where you have to go to get cheese, but there's a lot of good cheesemaking being developed here in California," said Jones, a retired UC-Berkeley tech writing instructor who is excited about cheese, goats and the growing movement to produce food locally. "I'm excited to be a part of it."

The artisan cheese industry is a natural extension of the region's high quality pasture lands, said Janice Austin, interim director of the College of Marin Community Education, Lifelong Learning and International Education program.

"The program has been tremendously popular, with waiting lists for

almost every class we have offered," Austin said. "We have loved the collaborative relationship we have with the California Artisan Cheese Guild."

The idea for the program grew out of early conversations about new vocational curriculum development between Sue Conley, Cowgirl Creamery co-founder, and Frances White, former president/superintendent of the College of Marin.

The California Artisan Cheese Guild helped create the program, and will offer graduates half-price guild memberships.

Program courses are taught by industry experts and includes "A Full Introduction to Artisan Cheese and Its Traditions" led by Daphne Zepos, co-founder of the Cheese of Choice Coalition and former American Cheese Society board member.

Other classes in the program cover basic starter cultures for cheese and fermented milks; cheese chemistry; principles and practices of cheesemaking; and GMPs.

"Promoting a certificate program means the overall quality of California cheeses will increase," said Lisbeth Goddik of the Oregon State University's department of food science and technology, who taught the class on milk types and quality.

Chris Clausen, an Internet banking engineer completed the course series last month. He thought cheesemaking would be a natural pairing with his partner's winemaking hobby but says now it has quickly grown into a passion he hopes to develop.

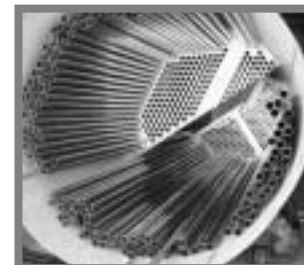
For more information on the College of Marin Artisan Cheese Certificate Program, contact Janice Austin at (415) 485-9316 or via email: janice.austin@marin.edu. r

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