



With A Little Help From Wisconsin, Iowa's Frisian Farms Finding Market Success With Small-Batch Gouda

A small, midwestern farmstead cheese plant in southern Iowa is breaking into Chicago's urban retail market with its flagship small-batch Gouda.

Located in Oskaloosa, IA, owner Jason Bandstra started Frisian Farms with 10 Holstein calves and slowly grew the herd over six years to its current size of 80. He also owns and operates a grain farm, which supplies much of the feed for Frisian Farms.

Prior to joining Frisian Farms, head cheese maker, co-owner and brother Mike Bandstra spent several years managing an organic dairy for Horizon Organic Dairy in Maryland.

The Bandstra family first contemplated starting a farmstead cheese operation about three years ago. The brothers concluded they "didn't want to milk a thousand cows, which you'd need to in order to support three families," said Jason Bandstra.

Taking advantage of added-value, we decided to make the plunge into cheesemaking, he said.

The first step was contacting the Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship for requisite licensing and to see if the project was even feasible.

Getting started was very hard – particularly working with state officials because they either couldn't help you, and wouldn't tell you what you needed to do, Bandstra said.

"We visited small cheese plants around Wisconsin and got some ideas. When we got back to Iowa, they didn't like it. We're all under the same federal regulations, but the way state inspectors interpret them is different. So that delayed us about five months," he said.

Since farmstead cheesemaking is scarce in Iowa, if the state inspectors didn't know the answer to our questions, their response was always pretty much "no," Bandstra said.

To facilitate the licensing process, Frisian Farms asked Wisconsin inspectors to write letters to their Iowa counterparts.

"It took a long, long time. It's almost like we had to train the inspectors here in Iowa," Bandstra said. "That was our first battle."

Both brothers are graduates of Iowa State University; Mike Bandstra completed several dairy processing courses while studying there.

When we first made our Gouda at Iowa State, we weren't very happy with it, Mike Bandstra said.

"It didn't taste like, 'Man – I have to buy this,'" Bandstra said.

So we hired a consultant from the Netherlands and let him try some.

He laughed a little bit and said, "Yeah. This is the way Americans make Gouda."

He subsequently showed us how to make Gouda the traditional way, Bandstra continued.

"It's pretty much hands-on and homemade, so you can compare it to homemade bread that your grandma made and store-bought bread," he said. "It's that much better."



Jason and Mike Bandstra own and operate Frisian Farms of Oskaloosa, IA. Their small batch farmstead Gouda hit the Chicago market last summer.

Frisian Farms milks its herd each morning and milk is pumped directly into its cheese vat.

Iowa law requires us to pasteurize our milk, and we pasteurize it to 140 degrees Fahrenheit for 30 minutes, which is the lowest temperature mandated, he said. Some big plants will flash-pasteurize at 212 degrees, which burns off a lot of the flavor.

"Pumping milk will also affect the flavor," Bandstra said. "Those big plants, they'll pump the milk seven or eight times, where we just pump it one time."

Between 15 and 20 percent of the company's total milk supply is dedicated to cheesemaking.

"Obviously, it's much more profitable to sell our milk as cheese rather than through our local co-op and have them process it for us," Jason Bandstra said.

"So our goal is to maximize the capacity of our cheese house, which means eventually dedicating 75 percent of our milk supply to cheesemaking," he continued.

Frisian Farms' 40-foot by 60-foot cheesemaking facility includes a processing room, small office, and climate-controlled, fully insulated affinage space set at 54 degrees and 85 percent humidity.

The company's Dutch consultant helped design the space and source cheesemaking equipment. All

equipment was purchased abroad from the Netherlands.

Plans were created in May 2007, and construction on the facility began the following fall. By January 2008, Frisian Farms was deep in the experimental cheesemaking phase, finally earning its license in April. The company completed its inaugural batch of cheese in June 2008.

When the time came to select a

flagship cheese, the decision was easy.

"All of our grandparents and great-grandparents are from the province of Friesland in the Netherlands," Jason Bandstra said. "Because of our rich Dutch heritage, we decided Gouda would be a natural fit."

When we first started, the plan was to age our cheese 60 days and sell it right away, Mike Bandstra said. However, the cheese of choice among consumers is Frisian Farms' aged Gouda, which is stored for about a year.

"Right now, I'm making cheese for next Christmas," he said. "We're always a little bit behind."

And since we initially planned on selling cheese at two months, our storage area is way too small, he continued. For added affinage space, the company purchased a refrigerated trailer.

Typically, cheese is made three times a week, producing roughly 900 pounds of Gouda. During the hectic harvest time, production is scaled down to once or twice a week, Mike Bandstra said.

In an effort to control cost, the onus of cheesemaking falls directly on the Bandstra brothers. Their father, Ron Bandstra, also helps with the dairy, crop production and the cheese operation.

"It does mean long days and long hours," Mike Bandstra said.

Frisian Farms Small Batch Gouda is sold across Iowa through chain grocery stores like Hy-Vee and specialty food co-ops such as Iowa City's New Pioneer Co-op and Gateway Market in Des Moines. The company scored a coup last summer by partnering with Chicago's Whole Foods Market, which now carries the Frisian Farms brand.

"We're leaning more in that direction," Mike Bandstra said. "I think the Chicago market is where we'll be able to sell a lot of cheese."

By selling through specialty stores, the price is marked up, making our Gouda a little pricier than other cheeses because it's very labor-intensive and we have to get what we need to out of it, Mike Bandstra said.

"So there's a little more reluctance to sample a whole bunch of it," he continued.

One of the greatest challenges the company continues to face is trying to forecast future demand.

"Right now as we enter our busy time, I would've told you we'd have enough cheese to last through Christmas, but already it's looking kind of short," Bandstra said.

Gouda will always be our flagship cheese and we'll continue to perfect it, he added.

"It's pretty much hands-on and homemade, so you can compare it to homemade bread that your grandma made and store-bought bread. It's that much better."

—Mike Bandstra

We're definitely seeing the benefits of a value-added operation. So whether we make more cheese, or some kind of butter, yogurt or ice cream, we'll continue to work exclusively with our milk and process it ourselves, and sell it at the retail or wholesale level, taking out the middleman, Bandstra said.

When we first started, our five-year goal was 1,000 pounds of cheese a week. We have the capability of making 1,500 pounds of cheese a week and once we hit that, I don't know, he said.

The easy answer would be to say we don't want to get any bigger – this is what we hoped for, he said. But we also need to keep up with demand as it takes off.

Frisian Farms' Gouda is available at www.frisianfarms.com. r