Hidden Springs’ Brenda Jensen: Trials & Rewards Of Sheep Milk Cheesemaking

Westby, WI—Hidden Springs Creamery sits high atop a hill in southwestern Wisconsin’s Driftless Region, miles from town and hours from the nearest major city.

Finding the creamery is a challenge, following winding country roads until you arrive at your destination: one of the most highly acclaimed and award-winning farmstead sheep milk cheesemaking operations in the country.

Last month, Hidden Springs Creamery took Best of Class and Third Place in the Flavored Soft & Semi Soft Sheep’s Milk Cheese category in the World Championship Cheese Contest for its Driftless Honey Lavender and Driftless Cranberry Cinnamon, respectively.

Brenda Jensen, owner and cheesemaker at Hidden Springs Creamery, also took Second Place in the Hard Mixed Milk category for her Meadow Melody Grande Reserve.

Meadow Melody American Original mixed milk cheese is made from cow and sheep’s milk.

In the beginning, we made this cheese at the start and the end of the seasonal sheep milk cycle, to ensure our customers had cheese year-round, she said. Now, because we milk more sheep, we are able to make cheese year-round, but we still make Meadow Melody because it tastes so darn good.

In 2014, Meadow Melody was named one of the top 16 cheeses in the World Championship Cheese Contest.

“I think it’s that good sheep milk – that really helps with the flavor,” Jensen said. “It’s also about learning the process and make the best cheese we can in every batch.”

What began years ago as a hobby farm with a small herd of 50 sheep, Hidden Springs Creamery now has about 350 sheep and is currently milking roughly 260.

“Since we milk year-round, we’re in different phases throughout the year,” Jensen said.

The creamery also makes cheese year-round, most of which travels to Chicago and on through a national distributor.

“We sell a lot in California through a distributor and New York through a distributor, then I’ve got my home base where I sell in Milwaukee and Madison,” Jensen said.

Hidden Springs also makes hard sheep milk cheese, washed-rind, Cheddar and mixed milk varieties, but the Driftless soft spreadable cheese is the biggest seller, accounting for about 65 percent of total production.

“We sell a lot of the Natural Driftless in five-pound tubs to foodservice and we do the small retail as well,” she said.

Besides herself, Jensen has a total of three full-time employees to help milk the sheep, run the farm and make cheese.

Fellow Wisconsin sheep milk and mixed milk cheese makers are both a source of support and inspiration, and also competition.

“Bob Wills of Cedar Grove beat me in the hard cheese. He’s been doing it longer than I have – probably one of the first ones in Wisconsin to make sheep milk cheese. And then there’s always Sid Cook,” Jensen said, referring to the owner of Carr Valley Cheese.

“We talk with Andy Hatch a lot from Uplands Cheese. We consolidated some cheese with him that goes out to California and New York,” Jensen said.

“I talk to Tony Hook, who buys our weekend milk from us, and Willi Lehner from Blue Mont Dairy, and Chris Roelli,” she said. "Marieke and I even took classes together up at UW-River Falls.”

One of the challenges of making sheep’s milk cheese is keeping the milk fresh and making small batches.

“We’re remotely located from other cities and distribution is an issue, Jensen said. I’d probably be more into fresh bloomy rind cheeses if I lived a little closer to other cities and distribution is an issue and distribution is an issue.

Shelf life can also be a concern. Otherwise, it’s such good milk. It’s easier to make good cheese with sheep milk than any other milk, Jensen said.

The creamery recently finished a large remodel project last year, and has plans to add a hay building, increase its sheep herd and subsequently increase cheese production.

“We’ll also be expanding our cheese storage facility as well, because we age most of our cheeses,” Jensen said. “We’ll be hiring more help, too.”

For the first time, I just started making a raw milk Cheddar, so I’m working on that to get where I want it to be, aging it out a bit, Brenda Jensen said. That’s pretty exciting.

“We think about yogurt, back and forth. You just need a lot of milk if it ends up going well,” she said.

“For fun, we’ve done some test batches and had friends take the first few bites, and they thought it was wonderful,” Jensen said. “It’s a Greek style – a little thicker than regular yogurt with more solids.”

It really is a unique market, though, and it takes a lot of time to market a new and different product, she said. You’re talking to different folks you’re selling it to – more on the dairy end than the cheese end.

For more information, visit www.hiddenspringscreamery.com.