



Award-Winning LaClare Farms Begins Construction On Farmstead Dairy Goat Plant

Pipe, WI—The family whose goat milk cheese entry captured the top prize at the 2011 United States Championship Cheese Contest expects to be operating in a new state-of-the-art facility within about six months.

"We've really been waiting for this to happen," Fond du Lac County executive Allen Buechel told the crowd at the ceremonial groundbreaking last Saturday for the new LaClare Farms farmstead dairy operation at the intersection of Highway 151 and County HH in the northeast part of the county near the east shore of Lake Winnebago.

Buechel was referring to the 18 months since he learned about what he described as the "impressive plans" for the facility at which about 600 dairy goats will be milked, cheese will be made and aged, a retail store and cafe will be open to the public, and an educational center will be included. It took even longer than that to put "all of the pieces of the puzzle" together for the multi-million dollar project, co-owner Larry Hedrich observed.

Hedrich, his wife Clara, and their five adult children are the co-owners of the project which is being sited on 13 acres of the farm which was purchased and operated by Larry's grandparents and which has been owned by his relatives ever since. His cousin John Jenkins, will be a partner in the new enterprise.

A Family That Works Together, Stays Together

For the Hedrich couple, the journey toward a new facility really began with a purchase of a farm just to the southwest of Chilton in 1978, Clara Hedrich told the groundbreaking ceremony crowd. The farmstead at which 330 goats are being milked today came with two milking goats, two peacocks, and a flock of laying hens.

As the Hedrich children became old enough to exhibit at fairs and goat shows, the size and quality of the goat herd were improved. By the mid-1990s, the family began to sell goat milk into the commercial market as a way to obtain value from the goat herd.

By 2001, Larry Hedrich left his job as an area superintendent for a construction company to tend to the goat herd fulltime and later became the manager of the Quality Dairy Goat Producers Cooperative of Wisconsin. Clara has been a high school vocational agriculture teacher for 37 years.

During the intervening years, all five of the Hedrich children earned college degrees, found professional

employment off the farm, and helped at the farm as availability allowed.

Katie Hedrich pursued cheesemaking from the goat milk and quickly earned national acclaim for her entry of Fenugreek Evalon cheese (named for Larry's grandmother) which won first place among the 1,604 entries in the US Championship Cheese Contest.

But the impetus for the long-awaited new farmstead facility was the decision by all five of the siblings to become involved in the new venture either full or part-time. Greg Hedrich is the business manager, Katie the production manager, Anna (Zastrow) a herd manager and computer specialist, Jessica a marketing and labeling specialist, and Heather the human resources manager for more than a dozen employees.

"This is how we can continue the family farm," Larry Hedrich told the crowd attending the groundbreaking.

The LaClare Farms milking herd contains the Alpine, Lamancha, Nubian, Saanen, Toggenburg and recorded grade breeds. The Zastrows have been raising goats to be added once the herd is expanded at the new facility, which is scheduled to open by late spring or early summer.

For the business plan, Larry Hedrich credited the role of James Gage at Wisconsin's former Dairy Business Innovation Center (DBIC), which closed at the end of September due to a termination of federal earmark funding.

Hedrich also mentioned cheese industry pioneer and promoter Dan Carter, who was a founder and last chairman of the DBIC. He commented that the business plan consisted of "40 pages and a lot of discussion."

The New Facility

Excavation of the former farm field began during the second week of December and construction will proceed throughout the winter.

The 35,000 square foot facility will be constructed as one unit that includes the housing, feeding area, and milking parlor for the goats, the creamery and cheese aging room, the retail store and cafe, and locations from which visitors can see the parlor, production plant, and cheese aging room through viewing windows. A video describing the steps of cheesemaking will also be shown.

Either separately or as a mix, milk from goats, sheep, and dairy cows can be processed in the production plant. The plans also call for making cultured products and bottling milk (currently bottled at Lamers Dairy in Appleton). The Hedrichs will also offer rental space to other dairy

processors and help them to launch new products.

Since February of this year, goat milk from LaClare Farms has been taken to Willow Creek Cheese near Berlin in Waushara County for making its Evalon, Fresh Chevre, Cheddar, Fondy Jack, and American Originals (Ziege Zack Blue and Chandola) cheese varieties.

A cheese variety crafted from four recipes is made for the Kelley's Country Creamery in southern Fond du Lac county.

Katie Hedrich also goes to a cheese plant at Shullsburg in southwest Wisconsin once a month to make batches of cheese. In brief comments at the groundbreaking ceremony, she noted that excellent cooperation is hallmark among the makers of specialty cheeses, whose facilities make about 22 percent of all the cheese produced in Wisconsin.

"The aging room is where the cheese really comes to life," Katie Hedrich remarked. She said that flipping the wheels once a week for five months is a tedious but very necessary chore.

Since beginning to make cheese from goat milk in 2008, LaClare Farms has established a national market and even had a few international sales for its product. With the increase in product volume that the new facility will accommodate, the resources of the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board will be used to expand the marketing opportunities.

Funding A Goat Milk Operation

Arranging the funding for the totally new site project was a major task, one that significantly delayed the start-up of the construction, Larry Hedrich acknowledged. LaClare Farms worked closely with the Fond du Lac County Economic Develop-

ment Corporation (FCEDC) to secure funding from several sources.

For a \$2.3 million industrial revenue bond, the Fond du Lac county government authorized the use of otherwise unused federal funds which were awarded as part of the Midwest disaster relief package in the wake of floods in 2009. This required approval by the county board of supervisors, which had to determine that the monies would be used for a worthwhile public purpose.

Larry Hedrich praised the Calumet County Bank agricultural loan officer Paul Meier for being a strong backer of the project since it was first contemplated.

FCEDC president Steve Jenkins also noted that LaClare Farms received a \$300,000 loan from the county's Special Allocation Revolving Loan Fund. In addition, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation and the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority combined to provide \$100,000 for the project. The project also has some silent partner investors, according to Greg Hedrich.

Clara Hedrich hopes that her family's project, which relies on a combination of its members' talents, will also serve an example and inspiration for others. She also mentioned the importance of trying to restore a connection between consumers and the food that they eat. Buechel believes the facility will draw people as visitors and customers and bring added attention to the county adding to its employment and economic base.

For more information about the history of LaClare Farms, to learn about its lineup of products, or to find out where those products are sold, visit www.laclarefarm.com, or call Larry Hedrich at (920) 849-2926. 



The Hedrich family stands next to a placard detailing the layout of the 35,000 square foot facility during the open house and groundbreaking ceremony. The new greenfield plant will house nearly 600 goats and will also include the creamery and cheese aging room, a retail store and cafe for a highly trafficked area east of Lake Winnebago in Fond du Lac county. In the photo are Katie Hedrich, Larry Hedrich, Greg Hedrich and Clara Hedrich.