



Sprout Creek Farm Seeks To Achieve 'Social Justice Through Cheese'

Sprout Creek Farm is a non-profit working farm in Dutchess County, NY, that not only provides educational and spiritual development programs for young people and adults,

but makes some impressive farmstead cheese as well. Its mission is uncomplicated and elegant – to provide a setting of natural beauty and educational experiences that will foster an appreciation for agriculture.

The 200-acre farm, established in 1992, first began making cheese about two years ago from its herd of grass-fed Jersey, Guernsey, Milking Shorthorn and Brown Swiss cows.

The cows are milked from March to December and the farm produces from 800 to 1,000 pounds of cheese a week, 32 weeks a year. The creamery staff makes cheese six days a week during the milking season.

Sprout Creek specializes in aged, mold-ripened cheese. It currently manufactures four varieties – Toussaint, Ouray, Barat and Ricotta. Toussaint has a buttery, fresh flavor that is best eaten without crackers or bread. Ouray is similar to Toussaint in texture, but sharper in flavor. Barat resembles Cheddar and its flavor tends to deepen over several days at room temperature.

Available in several sized wheels, Sprout Creek cheese can be purchased on the farm, through the company website and in specialty grocery stores throughout the Hudson Valley and New York City. It is also sold to upscale restaurants around the state.

While Sprout Creek relies on visiting students to perform the bulk of daily chores, it employs two full-time workers and three part-time employees to help run the operation. Allison Lakin, creamery manager, has been with Sprout Creek since September and has learned cheesemaking on-site.

"Allison is the best thing that hit – she is really phenomenal. Her understanding of the mission was instantaneous and her drive was unstoppable," said director Margo Morris.

Now that Sprout Creek has pretty much mastered the production process, its next big push is marketing. Last month, Lakin attended the first meeting of the New York State Farmstead and Artisanal Cheesemakers Association in Oneonta, NY. About 22 local industry members attended the meeting to gather information and advice on farmstead and artisanal cheesemaking.

Sprout Creek is also working with the Educational Training Institute on a proposed 200-hour externship which provides young chefs the skills to supplement their culinary arts education. Likewise, the operation also tries to employ physically-disadvantaged workers.

"We want to achieve social justice through cheese," Lakin said.

Sprout Creek's creamery is "the gem that's in the rough-cut stage. It's a good means to a good end," Morris said.

The Curriculum

Sprout Creek Farm was designed to offer programs reconnecting citizens to America's agricultural heritage, to offer an experience of community as a model of peaceable living and to use agricultural resources as a way of promoting a more enlightened, interdependent world.

These purposes require a program of farm work, study, service and communal living. Sprout Creek Farm currently offers three types of curriculum – residential, summer and day programs.

Year-round residential programs invite 10 to 18 year-olds to work the farm and participate in daily seminars about everything from world hunger to garden pests. Participants feed and care for the animals, tend crops, build and repair farm facilities, cook meals and deliver

Sprout Creek products to soup kitchens as far as the North Bronx. There, students share a meal with residents and return to the farm to discuss the experience.

Sprout Creek's summer programs – both day and overnight – offer children ages six to 10 the experience of working a real farm. Enrollment in all sessions is limited to give each child maximum contact with the animals and individual attention from the staff.

Day programs are offered throughout the year to several types of groups including schools and clubs. The programs provide children with instruction in such things as animal husbandry, organic gardening and the environment.

Young children learn about the development of offspring, watch the process of live birthing, observe mother animals caring for their young and learn how cows, goats and sheep give milk. Other programs focus on learning about wild and domestic plants and animals.

Morris said program response has been tremendous, with roughly 5,000 children and adults visiting the farm annually and a calendar booked a year in advance.

A 'Perfect' Vehicle For Learning

The concept of Sprout Creek Farm sprung from what Morris – a former high school literature teacher in Greenwich, CT – called a frustration with the modern educational system.

"Education was so compartmentalized," Morris said. "Kids were not getting the basic building blocks they need to make sensible, compassionate or responsible choices in their lives."

Then in 1982, three high school teachers, concerned with their students' "narrow horizons and somewhat self-centered dreams for the future," gathered to provide a better teaching environment. And a farm seemed the perfect vehicle for learning.

The school campus was built on the site of a turn-of-the-century farm, and one or two of the old barns remained. A small army of volunteers rebuilt, renovated and reconstructed what was needed with donated materials and a \$4,000 grant from the Society of the Sacred Heart.

Each three-week session of the residential program



served about 20 girls, ages 14 to 16, from Sacred Heart Network Schools throughout the US. After a few years, parents urged the farm to develop programs for younger children and in 1986, a summer day program was added to the high school residential program.

In 1987, farm administrators were approached by the estate of Elise Kinkead, a longtime Poughkeepsie resident, and offered the possibility of receiving the gift of Kinkead's Woodford Farm in LaGrange. After a period of negotiation, the property was subsequently given to the Society of the Sacred Heart, to be operated as Sprout Creek Farm.

"We built the farm using construction palettes, ingenuity, volunteers and big hopes."

—Margo Morris

The farm program in Greenwich closed in 1990. After a period of renovation, Sprout Creek became operational in September of that year and began offering programs to area schools.

"We built the farm using construction palettes, ingenuity, volunteers and big hopes," Morris said.

Recognizing that children are disconnected from their agricultural heritage, even from the sources of their food, we have placed more emphasis on "doing" the farming with children, according to Morris.

"We have found that this achieves the triple objective of teaching the basic connectedness of all the earth's species, learning the value of real work, and becoming responsible for the future of our planet," she continued.

"Once it's a farm, it's not contrived. Everyone is necessary. It always requires care and consistency," Morris said.

Regarding the future of the farm, particularly the creamery, Morris said that monetary success would be a pleasant, welcome surprise.

"The creamery could take off, which would help support our mission," she said. "Initially, we didn't know what would happen with this cheese, but it would be wonderful not having to rely on so many grants."

Sprout Creek Farm is not about financial gain. Its mission is to foster informed compassion and the desire to become an agent of change in a troubled global society.

"What I'd like to see for Sprout Creek Farm is to become a wonderful food source for those who can't possibly have access to really good food," Morris concluded. "It would involve a consortium, if you will, for this to happen." •